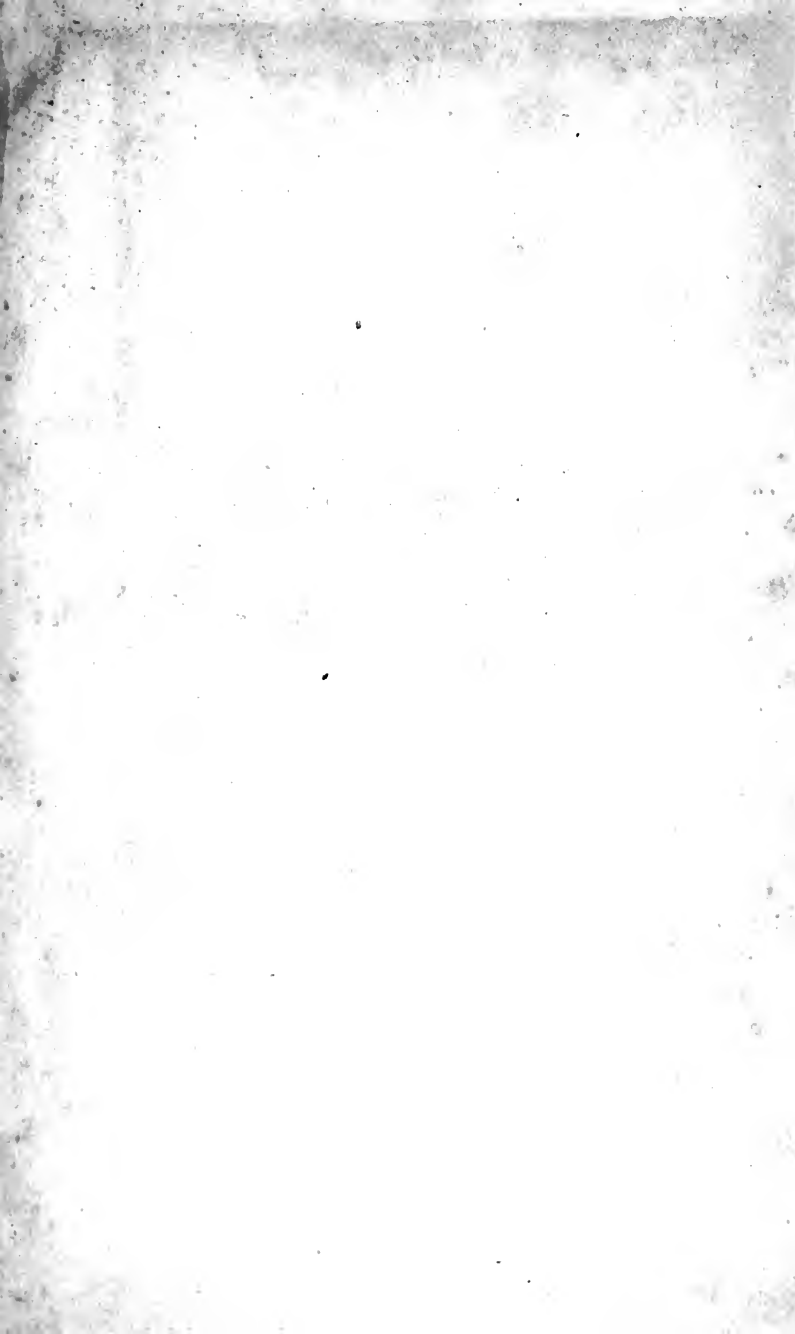


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LAVINIA

BY

RHODA BROUGHTON

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LAVINIA

CHAPTER I

"I SHALL never get over it."

This is a phrase that has issued from the same lips very often before; and in general Lavinia Carew listens to it silently, in the impatient confidence that at her next visit to Mrs. Prince, that lady will have got over "it" so completely as to have forgotten that "it" ever existed. She is silent now, but from an opposite reason to that which has hitherto tied her tongue. In her opinion neither Mrs. Prince nor any other Mrs. or Miss could ever get over the "it" in question.

"And coming on this joyful day too—a day, I mean, that is so joyful to every one else in England—that would have been so joyful to us, but for *this!*" The speaker breaks off with a whimper.

"The anniversary of Majuba Hill!" says Lavinia, with a fighting glint in a pair of uncommonly clear eyes, and uttering her ejaculation with none the less gusto for its being absolutely

unoriginal, and shared by almost every pair of lips in Great and Greater Britain this triumphal day.

"After the terrible gloom of the winter—never even in the Crimean War do I remember anything comparable to it!—just when the dead weight seemed to be lifting a little from all our hearts," pursues Mrs. Prince, raising to heaven her bangled wrists with a despairing jangle.

"The village is full of little Union Jacks," interrupts the girl, with a good-natured effort to keep her afflicted friend on the safe track of the public rejoicing, and also because she cannot quite restrain the expression of her own jubilation. "I cannot think where they all came from."

But the waving of no bunting before it can hide out the spectacle which is turning the national triumph to eclipse before the elder woman's vision.

"I suppose that I ought not to have told even you," she continues, resisting with mild doggedness her young friend's attempt to distract her thoughts, even momentarily, from her woes—not having, indeed, a mind hospitable enough often to admit two ideas abreast within its narrow portals. "No; I suppose that I certainly ought *not* to have revealed our disgrace even to you; but what was I to do? I had to tell some one—to seek for sympathy somewhere. I get none at home. I suppose that Mr. Prince feels it; but he says nothing. He is like a *stone*."

"I am sure that he feels it."

Something emphatic in the low-voiced assertion of her husband's sensibility, by one who has not the

advantage of relationship to him, grates on the rasped nerves of the poor wife.

"I never said that he did not feel it!" she cries in tart wretchedness. "Of course he feels it. He would not be human if he did not!"

Lavinia assents with a motion of the head, quite as emphatic as her former asseveration of Mr. Prince's sufferings.

"And if *I* had not told you"—answering the accusation of disloyalty brought by herself against herself, with as much defensive exasperation as if it had been proffered by her companion—"Féo would have done so herself! She sees nothing to be ashamed of. She *glories* in it!"

"*Glories in it!*"

"Yes, glories in it! incredible as it seems. But I wish, dear"—with a fretful relief in finding an object on which to vent her exquisite nerve-irritation—"that you would not repeat my words after me when you hear them perfectly."

"It is a stupid trick"—speaking with absolute and effortless good temper. "I think I do it without knowing."

"You are a good creature!" cries the other, seizing her companion's fingers with one hand, and with the other applying a very expensive pocket-handkerchief to the eyes that are swimming in mortified tears. "To-day I can't help snapping my best friend's nose off!"

"Snap away! There will be plenty left when you have done," replies Lavinia, playfully passing her fore finger down the ridge of a very handsome

feature. Then, with an immediate return to gravity, "I know that she came back in a very *exalté* state from that 'send off.' She managed to get an introduction to him—to the General, I mean—didn't she?"

Miss Prince's mother shakes her head. "No; she had no introduction. Lady de Jones, with whom we went, did not know him; but we had tickets. We were admitted to the platform. Before I guessed what she—Féo, I mean—was going to do, she pushed her way up to him—to where he was standing with his staff, and gave him a bunch of violets."

"Yes, I remember she told me"—trying honestly to keep out of her voice the disgusted disapprobation that the action thus recalled had inspired in her.

"He bowed and smiled, and took them. What else could he, could any gentleman, do? And we came away, and she was in the seventh heaven; and we both thought—her father and I both thought—would not you have thought?—that there was an end of it!"

"Yes, I should."

The bareness of this assent is due to the difficulty experienced by the speaker in refraining from expressing how incredible and "beyond all whooping" it appears to her, that to such a transaction there should have been a beginning.

"She has always been rather a 'handful,'" goes on the mother, with rueful dispassionateness—"determined to be unconventional and unlike other people, and all that sort of stuff; but it never

entered our heads that she would be so lost to all decency, to all self-respect, as to do this!—throwing herself at him like a woman in Regent Street; for that is what it comes to.”

The poor lady has worked herself up into a whirlwind of tears and sobs, which her young friend charitably hopes may relieve her.

“And you neither of you had the least suspicion?”

“Not the very least mite,” replied Mrs. Prince, who, though in everyday life *almost* quite ladylike, is apt, under the pressure of high emotion, to lapse into homely phrases that smack of her unregenerate state before the world-wide success of “Prince’s Dropless Candle,” the Féodorovna, had lifted her into affluence and the habit of wearing her *h’s* every day. “She has always had a very large correspondence”—with an accent that tells of murdered pride in the fact recorded—“writing to and receiving letters from people that neither her father nor I ever heard of! It was an understood thing that we should ask no questions. I should as soon have thought of flying in the air as saying to her, ‘Whom have you heard from?’”

“Then how—how did you learn about *it*?”

“She gave me the letter to read. We were at breakfast—her father and I—reading our papers, in such good spirits over the surrender of Kronje; it seems a year ago”—with a transient look of bewilderment—“and in she came, holding an open letter in her hand, and said, with that odd smile she sometimes puts on—I am always uneasy when

I see that smile—"There has sometimes been a little soreness about my keeping my correspondence to myself. Here is a letter that I invite you both to read," and she laid it down on the table before me!" The mother pauses, her face working.

"Well?" in a breathless sympathy.

"I just glanced at the signature, and saw it was his. But even then it never struck me—I did not put two and two together. Who could have imagined such a thing about her own child? And she had not mentioned his name for weeks."

"No?"

"I read it!" pausing to gasp, "and then her father read it!"

"Yes?"

"I—I have nothing to say against it," speaking with twitching lips. "It was everything that was honourable and gentlemanlike!"

A longer pause. Lavinia has put her elbows on the little Empire table that interposes its fragile elegance between her and her companion, and is digging her knuckles into the cheeks that are blazing with vicarious shame.

"He said that—yes, I had rather tell you—that he was inexpressibly touched; but that in his busy life there was no room for feelings of that sort; that he was old enough to be her father; and that he had thought it right to destroy her letter."

Probably the dumb sympathy written so redly over Lavinia's face is a better plaister for poor Mrs. Prince's gaping wound than would have been any of the words that so absolutely refuse to come

at the girl's invocation. There are many ointments that soften the smart of death, of parting, of estrangement; but what physician or quack alive has ever yet invented a successful unguent for shame?

"Even when I had read it, I did not take it in! I said to her, 'Why have you shown me this? What does it mean? Where does it come from?' 'It came by the South African mail this morning,' she said, looking me quite straight in the face, 'and it is General ——'s answer to a letter I wrote him five weeks ago, offering myself to him.'"

It is the measure of Miss Carew's view of the situation, that the nearest approach to consolation which she can produce is the question, "Don't you think she is out of her mind?"

But the mother rejects even the extremely modest form of comfort thus offered to her.

"Not more than she has always been!" adding ruefully, "She came too late in our lives—after twenty childless years! We had wished too much for her."

Both are silent, Lavinia throwing her eyes distressfully round the room, upon which Maple has worked his sumptuous will, in search of some phrase that may ring not too mockingly. She only succeeds in bringing home to herself the furious irony of the contrast between her companion's upholstery and the wrinkled wretchedness of her face. Yet, after a moment of hopelessness, one of her propping hands drops down and hurries across the table to stroke the mourner's sleeve, while her good eyes

brighten at the thought that she has at last hit upon something really soothing to suggest.

"It will never go any further! With a man like *him*, the soul of honour, her secret is certain to be sacred. Nobody but we need ever know it, and we will let it die as soon as we can."

"Nobody but we need ever know it!" repeats Mrs. Prince, with a shrill intonation of scornful woe. "That shows how little you know her! She herself will proclaim it on the housetops." Then, with a sudden change of key, "She is coming this way—singing, if you please! Don't you hear her? You must excuse me, I really can't face her just yet."

The mother rises hastily, and disappears, rustling, jingling, weeping through a handsome mahogany door into a Maple boudoir, just as another handsome mahogany door opens to admit the subject of the late conversation into the room whence her advent has chased her parent.

"You have been hearing of my crime?" says she, coming in and shaking hands conceitedly high up in the air.

Féodorovna Prince is a prettyish girl, long and reedy, with a skin, hair, and hands whose merits make the casual looker forgive the thumblike shape of her nose and the washiness of her foolish eyes.

"Yes, I have."

"And what is your opinion of it?"

"I think I had rather not say."

Miss Prince is standing before the fireplace, a hand on each side of her phenomenally long eighteen-inch waist.

"You need not be afraid of hurting my feelings," she says, with a self-satisfied smile.

"I do not think I am at all afraid of that."

Féodorovna ceases to smile, but continues to balance herself gracefully.

"I was born quite unlike other people ! I have always been keenly conscious of that. I have a right and wrong of my own ; and they are not the conventional ones."

Lavinia listens in ireful silence ; but no one glancing at the conflagration in her eyes could mistake her speechlessness for approval.

"You asked General —— to marry you ?" she says, with a point-blankness that would be pitiless, were there any question of a need for compassion.

But Féodorovna does not wince. "I did not put it quite so crudely as that !" — with a slightly superior smile. "I told him that I loved and revered him beyond all created beings, and that I was his to do what he willed with !"

"And he did not will to do anything ?" replies Lavinia, brutally.

Her stinging speech scarcely raises the colour in Miss Prince's faint cheeks.

"He treated me with the same perfect loyalty that I had treated him !"

Lavinia's answer is impatiently to pull open her own fur collar, as if she were choking, and to repeat, half under her breath with a species of snort—

"*Loyalty !*"

The other girl sits slowly down upon the Aubusson hearthrug, taking her small knees into the embrace

of her lengthy arms, and looking straight before her.

"Would you like to see his letter?"—lifting one hand towards the breast of her gown.

The indication of what delicate lodging has been provided for the hard-hearted hero's missive adds vigour to Miss Carew's emphatic negative.

"I had far rather not."

Féodorovna's thin pale hand drops to her side. "I want every one to see it!" she says. "I want every one to know that if I have loved unhappily, I have loved worthily—have loved the noblest object that ever 'swam into my ken'!"

The self-satisfied bravado has gone out of her face and manner; and as she lifts her rather colourless eyes to the ceiling, as if expecting to see her General sitting enthroned among the planets, Miss Carew realizes with enhanced consternation that she is in deadly, *deadly* earnest.

"I always made up my mind," pursues Féodorovna presently, in an intense low voice, "that it ever I met a man really worth loving—no matter what his situation or circumstances in life were—I would offer myself to him. I have done so!"

"And he has refused you!" rejoins Lavinia in a strangled voice, where wonder and scorn are half throttling each other. "And you are *alive*?"

This time the whip-lash does leave a slight weal in its bitter track.

"Why shouldn't I be alive?" asks Féodorovna, as her throbbing throat rears itself out of the delicate laces and pearls that surround it. "More alive than

I have ever been before. So far from being ashamed of my action, I *glory* in it—yes *glory*!” her voice rising in jubilant inspiration. “Not one girl in ten thousand would have had the courage to do as I have done !”

Miss Carew draws in her breath between two rows of excellent white teeth.

“And what do you propose to do next? To write and ask him to reconsider his decision?”

The wind is somewhat taken out of the speaker’s sails by the quiet literalness of the answer.

“No; I shall do nothing further! I bow to his will”—suiting the action to the word by a stoop of her russet head. Then, raising it again proudly—“All the rest of my life will be spent in trying not to fall below the standard to which my love for him has lifted me !”

CHAPTER II

IN February light still reigns, though with uncertain sceptre, up to six o'clock in the evening, and the fact that the cold, aquamarine tinge is dying out of the west when she turns her back upon the Chestnuts, tells Miss Carew how much beyond its first scope her call has been prolonged. In the first place, she has been compelled, after all, to read General ——'s letter, and give her grudging meed of praise to its tact and humanity. Secondly—this has been the longest and hardest part of her task—she has had to reassure Mrs. Prince, who soon reappears, still tearful and jingling, as to the document having been undoubtedly penned by the hero himself, and not committed to a chuckling aide-de-camp or grinning secretary. Thirdly, she has been conducted into Mr. Prince's sanctum, for the express purpose of cheering him up by light and general conversation, his hurt being much too deep and sore to suffer even the most distant approach to it.

She finds him sitting with his British-merchant bullet-head clutched in his hands, unable to be cheered even by the sight of the trophies, medals, and certificates—national and international—to the

merits of his candle, which, to the sad mortification of his ladies, lavishly decorate the walls. At the sound of her entry—convoyed by his wife—he looks angrily up, and she realizes, with a warmer feeling of sympathy and fellow-feeling than he has ever before inspired, how very much he would have preferred that she had stayed away. His manner to women is always elaborate, and she sees him now struggling back into it with as much difficulty as a footman, in haste to answer a bell, fights his way into a tight livery coat. She longs to beg him to remain metaphorically in his shirt-sleeves. But no; he is already on his feet.

“I am afraid I am intrusive”—this is his almost invariable opening phrase where “the sex” is concerned—“but have you left Sir George and Mr. Campion quite well?”

“Miss Carew is come to have a little chat with you,” says his wife, with an air of cheerfulness “made in Germany.” “You know you and she always like a bit of fun together!”

She introduces and retreats hastily, with some misgiving, probably, as to the quality of the “fun” in question, and with clearly no desire to share it. Lavinia remains behind, to emerge, half an hour later, sorry and discouraged, with the consciousness of having been only partially successful in the attempt to be gamesome, unconcerned, and un-African. Yet the old man—oddly old to be Féodorovna’s father—has thanked her when she left him. She has not quite recovered the chokiness engendered by his gratitude when she is recaptured

by Mrs. Prince, feverishly anxious to be again reassured as to the genuineness of the General's autograph, and the certainty that her daughter's passion for their Chief has not been given as a prey to the merriment of his staff. The fear is so preposterous that Lavinia would have had difficulty in reasoning it down with any show of patience, if pity had not come strongly to her aid—pity and a life-long apprenticeship to answering the not-worth-answering. It takes her three quarters of an hour of solid argument, lucid exegesis, and persuasive rhetoric to convince Mrs. Prince that the commander of an Army Corps on active service has other employment for his time than the publishing to his subordinates the hysterical folly of a love-sick girl; and, moreover, that such a course would scarcely be in consonance with the creed and normal habits of an officer and a gentleman. It takes three quarters of an hour to convince Mrs. Prince, and, at the end, she is not convinced. With a slight sigh of waning endurance, Miss Carew realizes her lost labour, and turns back on another spoor.

"She has promised—indeed, there was no need to exact a promise—she volunteered it, that she is not going to take any further steps—to do anything more!"

"*Do anything more!*" echoes the mother, with an accent of the acutest scorn of this fresh attempt at solace. "Why, what more would you have her do? What more could she do? Unless——"

She breaks off abruptly, and both know that she has been on the brink of an utterance more suited,

in its crude vernacular, to her former than to her present estate. Both feel relieved that it has remained in the domain of the implied ; and, with a tactful fear lest the crestfallen fellow-creature before her may be betrayed into some outburst of which she may later repent on her return from the regions of primæval emotions to the upholstered "reception-rooms" of gentility, Miss Carew hurries over her adieux. Yet that "hurry" is scarcely the word to be applied to her visit taken as a whole is brought home to her by the look of beast-and-bird bedtime spread over the evening world as she gets out into it.

"Are you ready?" she asks, addressing the back of a man-person whom the first turn in the Park Road reveals kicking pebbles ahead of her in obvious waiting.

"*Am I ready?*" rejoins he, wheeling round, with good-tempered upbraiding. "You told me to be here at 5.30. It is now 7.15; and you ask, *Am I ready?*"

Lavinia wisely attempts no defence. "Well, *are you?*" she asks, smiling, but not coquettishly.

Of what use is it to be coquettish to a person in the same house, with whom you have always lived, and your engagement to be married to whom has had all the gilt taken off its gingerbread by the fact that you cannot remember the time when you were not engaged to him, and who is, to boot, your first cousin?

They walk on in silence for a few moments, she expecting and a little dreading to be questioned,

and he confident that she will volunteer an explanation if he does not ask for one. But she refrains.

"Well, were they as good as usual? Have you no conversational plums to reward me with?"

Lavinia winces. Is this a moment to remind her of how often she has served up the pretensions and vulgarities of the family whom she has just quitted on such affecting terms for the joint amusement of herself and her *fiancé*?

"Don't!" she answers hurriedly. "You do not know how you jar!"

He raises his eyebrows. "I know how cold I am," he rejoins, still with perfect temper, "and I shall be very glad to know why I *jar*, if you will only tell me."

"That is just what I can't," says she, wrinkling her forehead; "but you may take my word for it that you do. You ring dreadfully out of tune."

"In point of fact, one of your not uncommon waves of hatred for me is going over you," replies he, resignedly. "I know that they are never to be accounted for."

"No; I do not feel any special hatred for you to-night," replies she, dispassionately. "But I can't tell you what is not my secret. In point of fact, it is not really a secret at all, as Féodorovna will certainly proclaim it to you next time you meet her; but I can't tell it."

"It *is* a secret, and it is not a secret; and *you* may not tell it me, though Féodorovna may! What dark sayings are these?" cries he, gaily, perfectly

indifferent as to her mystery, though diverted at the pomp with which she is investing it.

But his lady-love is not to be won to any answering lightness.

"I see nothing to laugh at," she says; and even in the rooky twilight he can perceive her frown. "I pity them from the bottom of my heart. One of the greatest misfortunes possible—yes, I really think I do not exaggerate—one of the greatest misfortunes possible has fallen upon them."

"Has the Candle begun to drop after all these years?" asks he, still incorrigibly flippant.

She quickens her pace, as if to get away from him.

"I have always known that there was something lacking in you."

"I have always known that there were a great many things lacking in me," interrupts he, mending his pace too.

"Even if I had not promised, nothing would induce me to tell to any one so unsympathetic——"

"I do not want you to tell me! I do not care a button what has happened to them!" cries he, rudely, but half laughing.

Bested in the attempt to outstrip her companion, Miss Carew stops short.

"You would be sorry if you knew," she throws out tantalizingly, unable to resist the temptation to go as near as possible to the line which she is resolved not to cross, and unworthily annoyed at the absence of pressure put upon her.

"I should not," replies her lover, with quiet

conviction. "If it were anything that would make them less beastly prosperous, I should be glad."

"There was nothing 'beastly prosperous' about them to-day," says she indignantly, as memory reconstructs the bitterly dripping tears of the one millionaire, and the stubby head clutched in short coarse hands of the other.

He receives the information in silence, not wishing to make her more angry than she already is, and being really quite without interest as to the topic which engages her.

Lavinia is obliged to give up the attempt to stimulate a curiosity which, after all, she has no right to gratify, and, thrusting her partisanship into her pocket, reluctantly changes the topic.

"Have you found out why your father was so much put out at luncheon?"

It is growing too dark to see his face, but she catches the instant change in his tone.

"Yes."

"I told you that there must be some cause."

"Because he exceeded even his usual ample measure of incivility to me, do you mean?"

There is very little bitterness in the voice or words, only a sort of regret mixed with some not quite ordinary quality of patience.

"I felt sure that he had had something to ruffle him."

"He has always something to ruffle him. He has always *me*; but to-day, dear old chap, he had something more."

"What?"

"Poor Bill's things came back this morning—his watch and his cigar-case, and mother's photograph—and with them, I think, but of course father did not show that to me, a letter from the fellow whom Bill picked up on his own horse, and brought out from the Boer fire when he himself was mortally wounded."

There is an unresenting pain running through the whole of this narrative, but Lavinia does not notice it.

"Does the letter give any more details—say whether he suffered much?" she asks, in white eagerness. "Oh, but I forgot," half impatiently, "you did not see it!"

"He will show it to you," replies the young man, as if stating a perfectly natural and accountable fact.

After a pause, while they both trudge on in hushed emotion—

"Poor old fellow! if he knew how much I understood what it must be to him to see me there, who am the embodiment of everything that he despises and dislikes, eating my luncheon, well and fit, while Bill is lying in his wretched makeshift of a South African grave, he would perhaps hate me a little less than he does."

The girl turns to him now impulsively, her fine lucid eyes shining wetly in the semi-darkness.

"And if he could but look into your heart—oh, why haven't we windows in our breasts? how much fewer mistakes there would be if we had!—he would see how gladly, *gladly* you would change places with Bill!"

The appeal is not answered. Campion's head is sunk on his breast.

"You would, wouldn't you?" she cries urgently, as if she could not bear a moment's delay in the assent to a proposition so obvious.

There is an instant's pause; then her companion—they have both stopped—lifts his eyes with obvious difficulty to hers.

"No," he says, in a low but not uncertain voice, while the moon, which has just looked over a clump of neighbouring hornbeams, lights the sincerity of his quivering face, "I would *not* rather change places with Bill. I would rather be alive here, walking with you, than lying cold and bloody under that hideous veldt. I have never had any opinion of what is conventionally called *honour*. 'Who hath it? He that died o' Wednesday.' Well, I have no wish to have died o' Wednesday."

For a moment a look of terror and aversion crosses Lavinia's face; then her brow grows clear.

"It is lucky for you that I do not believe you," she says, with a sort of laugh—"that I know your ways."

"Do you?" he answers, half under his breath; and again they walk on.

They are outside the Park gates, have followed the road that leads past the King's Woods, and have reached the brow of the hill, half-way down which the village lights show their yellow points, and the church steeple tells its jackdaws, now silent in bed, to the tune of "The Last Rose of Summer," that it is seven o'clock. Upon the silvering sky

the Kentish oast-houses draw their extinguisher outline.

"I have always wondered," says Campion, slowly, as they begin to descend the steep slope side by side, "why, feeling as you do, you did not pitch upon Bill instead of me."

"I did not pitch upon you," replies she, quietly. "I believe that I was born engaged to you, as I was born Uncle George's niece. It seems to me as if the one has been as little a matter of choice as the other!"

There is, if no romance, at least so rock-like a certainty in her way of stating their relationship, that the young man feels a sudden lightening of a heart that has been heavy enough.

"That, perhaps, is why we never can decide whether I asked you or you me?"

"Oh yes, we can!" retorts she, also in a gayer vein. "As soon as I could speak I suggested our marrying when we grew up. You demurred, and asked whether we might not live together without marrying? I rejoined that that would be wicked, and that Nanna said we should go to hell if we did, whereupon you reluctantly consented."

Both laugh, and arrive at the tree-hung entrance to their modest house in better humour with each other than had at one time seemed probable. But once inside the hall-door, the little spurt of cheerfulness dies down.

"Is he in his own room?" Lavinia asks under her breath, and the answer, "He was when I came out," uttered with equal precaution, sends her treading

lightly towards a shut door, through the old-fashioned fanlight over which a light is visible. Neither she nor her cousin-lover suggests that he shall accompany her.

As she enters the idea strikes her with a half-whimsical sadness, for what different types of sorrow she has within an hour had to provide consolation. Equally different is the setting to those sorrows. In his little Spartan room, with its large knee-hole writing-table, and its sparse decorations of old coloured stage-coach prints, portraits of departed hunters and famous jockeys, Sir George Campion sits in his leather chair, reading his *Country Life* with a resolutely everyday look. There is only one bit of driftwood to show the shipwreck in which his old heart went down two months ago ; and that is the few little objects neatly arranged on the small table that carries his reading-lamp, within reach of that hand and eye, which yet would seem ostentatiously unaware of them. Lavinia's action ignores the poor little pretence. She goes straight up to the sitting figure, and lays her hand gently but firmly on his shoulder.

"So they have come back !" she says, her frank ringing voice sympathetically lowered and chastened. "Thank God that the Boers have not got them !"

"Yes ; they arrived this morning !" replies he, still with his disengaged air.

She touches the little articles with delicate reverence one after another.

"Yes ; here are all our presents—not one missing ; the poor rector's electric bâton"—with a

little half-sobbing laugh—"that we all made such fun of when it first came ; and yet, if you remember, *he* said, in one of his first letters, how useful it had turned out."

The father listens, still striving to maintain the look of being disturbed by irrelevant trifles in a congenial occupation ; but the paper crackling slightly betrays the trembling of the fingers that hold it.

The girl sits down on the worn arm of her uncle's chair, while her own arm passes round his neck.

"You have had a letter too?" she says, in a voice of cautious tenderness, as one drawing near to an open gash, and adding the caress of a light kiss dropped upon his grey hair.

"Who told you that I had a letter?"

"Rupert ; but he said that you had not shown it to him."

For the moment Sir George forgets to feign. "I thought it might frighten him," he answers, with a disagreeable smile. "There is a good deal about Mausers and dynamite, and such ugly things in it."

She does not take up the jeer, though it makes her stingingly hot, as if she herself were its object.

"Rupert thought that perhaps you might show it to me?" she suggests.

"I have no objection to *your* seeing it!" returns he, with significant emphasis ; "that is to say, if I can find it."

With a repetition of that poor parade of carelessness, he feigns to search in all his pockets, as of one that has mislaid something too valueless to be

hoarded, and ends by bringing out from—where she had never doubted its resting—the one nearest his heart the narrative of his son's death, penned by that dead boy's comrade. Lavinia unfolds it, and, with head reverently bowed, begins to read. It is written in pencil, evidently by one to whom pens and stationery are non-existent, and in parts it is hard to decipher. There is absolute stillness in the room. *Country Life* has fallen upon the carpet, but Sir George forgets to pick it up. Lavinia pauses at last ; for the excellent reason that her eyes are too thick with tears to do her any service.

“Oh, *what* a tribute !” she says, in a suffocated whisper. “You must never—*never*”—catching his hand, and raining salt drops upon it—“never again be so selfish as to grudge him such a glorious death ! Oh, which of us does not envy him ? which of us would not change with him ?”

She breaks off suddenly, memory pouring upon the furnace of her passion the cold stream of her *fiancé's* cynical question, “Who hath it ? He that died o' Wednesday.” It was only talk, only said to tease her ; but why does it recur to her now, like a blasphemy hissed into a believer's ear in a sanctuary ? In a groundless terror lest her thought should be read, she dashes her handkerchief across her eyes, and resumes reading. But every sentence, unstudied, unliterary, plain and crude in its direct passage from heart to heart, blurs her voice afresh—

“What a tribute !” she repeats, trying to steady her broken voice so as to read aloud intelligibly snatches from the letter before her : “‘Never saw

anything to equal his pluck, except his patience—his colonel quite broke down when he bid him good-bye—so cheerful—and making jokes even up to——” Again she breaks off, stayed by weeping.

“He was a promising lad!” says the father, in an iron voice. Then against his will the mask falls for a moment: “And this,” he cries, striking the table beside him with his clenched fist, in a sort of rage—“these,” pointing to the little relics tragic in their insignificance—“these are all that is left of him and his career! These are all that I have left to live on!”

With what but the awe and pity of her silence can Lavinia answer an outburst so heartrending? Several minutes elapse before she dares to hesitate her small attempt at solace.

“Do we go *quite* for nothing? You have *us* left! We may not be much, but we are *something*!”

No sooner is it uttered than she sees, by the dull rage in his eyes and the sneer on his lips, how more than useless her effort has been.

“Yes; I have certainly Rupert of the Rhine left! Ha! ha! He has a whole skin at present, and I expect he will take precious good care that it keeps whole!”

Lavinia takes her arm away, and rises to her feet, in deeply wounded discouragement, reddening in her lover’s behalf even more deeply than she had with vicarious shame at Féodorovna’s immodesty.

“Are you angry with him for not being dead too?” she asks, standing before her uncle with locked hands and burning eyes. “Well, perhaps he

will oblige you ; he has never been very strong ! ” Then, with a revulsion of feeling, flinging herself on her knees beside the old man, “ Do not be unkind to him ! you know that, though they were so different, Bill liked him very much ! Oh ! ”—bowing her nut-brown head on his knees—“ oughtn’t we to love each other all the better, now that there are so few of us ? ”

CHAPTER III

THE modest, low house on the Kentish hillside, with its pink, rough-cast face, its tall, narrow, eighteenth-century windows, its verandah, the alternate object of summer blessings and winter curses, has been Lavinia Carew's home ever since her mother had crowned a foolish marriage by a perhaps less foolish death within the year. Being one of those completely unfortunate persons whom Fate seems to delight in belabouring, her husband had predeceased her by a fortnight. Upon the doubly forsaken baby's nearest blood relation, Sir George Campion, had devolved the choice of two alternatives—that of saddling himself for life with a creature against whose entry into it he had always angrily protested, and that of sending it to the workhouse, and being called an unnatural brute for his pains. He chose the first ; though, as everybody said, with a very ill grace. But the people who kindly tried to tell her this in later days could never get Sir George Campion's niece to believe it.

Yet her life has scarcely been a bed of roses, though love has not been lacking ; and her three men have had that immense opinion of her which makes up to most of her sex for any amount of bodily

or mental char-ing. Of women in her home, save servants, there have, within her recollection, been none. Marriage is not an institution that seems to thrive in the Campion family, and so early in Lavinia's history that only the faintest blur of memory of something kind and connected with cakes remains to the girl, her uncle's wife had slipped inoffensively away to the churchyard, conveniently close to the pink-faced house. Often since she has grown up into sense and thoughtfulness, Lavinia has speculated about that dim lady, of whom no one now ever speaks—all others because they have forgotten her, and one concerning whom no one knows wherefore he is silent—speculated whether in her lifetime she had had as much buffer-work to do as has fallen to Lavinia herself, and whether, not being of so robust a constitution of mind or body, it had ended by killing her. For Lavinia is, and for several years past has been, before all things, a buffer. Has there ever been a day for so long as she can remember, when she has not been called upon to use her characteristic gifts to deaden and smooth and blunt the jars and bumps that her perpetually colliding men are always inflicting upon each other? The fault has nearly always lain with the father, gifted with that most infallible double endowment for ensuring unhappiness in life—a deep heart and an impossible temper.

She is thinking of him with tender ruth next morning as she stands under the verandah, looking across the downward slope of garden, grass, sun-dial, and snowdrop borders, to the spacious view over the

Weald of Kent, Hastingswards. On her right, a towering hedge of espaliered elms parts her—it alone and a few unseen green hillocks—from the little red-roofed thirteenth-century church and its emerald God's acre. From the top of the church tower, it is said that on a clear day you can discern the masts of ships, though not the very sea. To this kind of seeing there goes usually more of imagination than eyesight ; but the belief has, since the days of King John, heightened the village's opinion of itself. To the left the prospect is bounded by the great group of horse-chestnuts, leafless now and purple, in the Rectory garden.

It is to the Rectory that Lavinia is bound—the Rectory, where she gets her fresh eggs, and carries some of her troubles. She is dressed in black for her dead cousin ; but the freshness of her cheeks and lips, and the sunshine that lives in her hair, make it always difficult for her to look in mourning. Her spirits are still tender from the emotion of last night, and her thoughts musing pityingly upon her men—the live one who is taking his punishment so deadly hard, and the dead who, though now so deified and enshrined in his father's broken heart, had not, any more than herself, found his short life a bed of roses. Poor Bill ! Never again would she have to insert the pad of her smoothing words between his sensitiveness and the sting of his father's speech—that father who, though he would joyfully have died ten thousand deaths for him, yet could not resist venting the gibes born of adversity and constitutional ill humour upon the creature whom, “if Heaven had made

him such another world of one entire and perfect chrysolite," he would not have sold for it. Poor Bill !

With a heartfelt sigh she fetches her egg-basket and sets off through the churchyard to her goal. It is a roundabout way, since the Rectory grounds actually touch the wall at the bottom of the Campion garden ; and there had once, not so long ago, been a trellised door through which Rectory and Place ran in and out at will, but in an unexplained spurt of resentment or suspicion, Sir George had had it walled up. It has been a cause of great inconvenience to himself, and he has very much repented it ever since the spurt passed ; but pride forbids him to undo his deed. The Rectory regrets it too, but with wise and understanding want of resentment. Its own front gate stands hospitably open, and the shortness of its drive soon brings the visitor to the hall-door—wide open too—for the Rectory is nothing if not airy ; and, indeed, since the children could never remember to shut it after them, it may as well gape legally as illegally.

"You are quite a stranger," says the rectoress, turning with an air of relief from her pile of household books ; for though she is a good woman and does her accounts, she is not of those who love them. "What became of you all yesterday ?"

"I was at the Princes' most of the afternoon," replies Lavinia, sitting down with the air of an *habitué*, her egg-basket on her knees. "They were in trouble—bad trouble, of a sort ; but you must not ask me what." Then, seeing a humorous sparkle in

her friend's eye, she adds, half-laughing, "Oh, I see that you are in the secret."

"Féodorovna has just been here to proclaim her heroic deed," says Mrs. Darcy, drily.

"Isn't it inconceivable?" cries Lavinia, starting up with a revival of the passion of shame that had overcome her on first hearing of Miss Prince's exploit, while the egg-basket, happily not yet laden, rolls on the floor.

"There is no reason why it should turn *you* into one gigantic blush," replies her friend, looking at her with a grave smile. "You have not the distinction of having been informed that a very successful General has no immediate use for you!"

"Did you tell her what you thought of her?" asks the other, in a low voice, and giving a start of maidenly ire at the suggested possibility.

"Why should I?" asks the clergyman's wife, lifting her sensible, tolerant eyes to her companion's still discoloured countenance. "Would that have undone it?"

"And you let her brag about it? You allowed her to believe——?" Lavinia breaks off.

"I do not think that she left me with the impression that I admired her," replies the other in an exceedingly quiet key; and Miss Carew is at once appeased and silenced.

"Yesterday was painful from start to finish," resumes the girl, presently. "Some days *are* like that, aren't they? Yesterday"—with that respectful drop of the voice which is our tribute to the departed—"poor Bill's things came back."

The news brings a lump into the throat of the person addressed, for, like most of his acquaintances, Mrs. Darcy had been fond of fine, plucky, upstanding Bill Campion. It is a minute or two before she can dress her sympathy in enough composure to say—

“And, of course, that upset *him* very much?”

“No; he was not upset,” replies Lavinia, a sort of hopeless pity in voice and look. “He is never upset; it would be much better for him if he were—and for *us*.”

“Yes, poor fellow!”

“I was afraid that we should have a dreadful dinner,” continues Lavinia, with the relieved expansiveness of perfect intimacy addressing perfect comprehension. “I was afraid he would have one of his attacks of hating us for being alive!”

“He never hates *you* for being alive.”

“Well, ‘us’ means Rupert, and Rupert means ‘*us*’; you know that.”

There is more of loyalty than grammar in the creed expressed; but as to the staunchness of the believer’s faith there can be no two opinions.

“Yes, I know.”

If a faint wonder tempers the acquiescence of the hearer, it does not reach her companion’s ear.

“He had called him ‘Rupert of the Rhine’ in the afternoon; that is always a very bad sign. Nothing makes Rupert wince so much as being called ‘Rupert of the Rhine.’”

Mrs. Darcy’s neck turns a little aside, so as partially to avert a face on which a scarcely sketched

smile that has not much real amusement in it is dimly visible.

"But things turned out better than I expected," pursues the girl, with a lilt of recovering spirits in her not very low but yet agreeable voice. "The dear old fellow put great constraint upon himself, and was quite civil to—*us*"—with a small challenging smile, as she lays an obstinate emphasis upon the plural pronoun—"and 'we' tried our best not to be offensive, and even asked one or two quite sporting questions, and did not make any very egregious mistakes."

The end of her sentence is half drowned in the ringing of a very loud one-o'clock bell. The Rectory lunches half an hour earlier than the Place.

"I must be off!" cries the visitor, starting up; "and I have never got my eggs, after all. Ah, here are the children!"

As she speaks, a burst, rather than opened, door announces the entry of three young creatures between the ages of eight and fourteen, in whose faces and persons dirt and good looks strive in amicable emulation for the mastery.

"Miss Brine had to go off again to her sick sister this morning," says the mother, in placid explanation. "I do not believe that any one ever had a governess with so many and such diseased relatives as I," she laughs; but her amusement is not echoed by her husband, who, correct and glossy, at the moment enters the room from his study. On the contrary, he regards with a fidgety distress the vestures which some unknown quest has dyed in mud; not even sparing

the rosy countenances above them. He testily orders off his son and daughters at once to change their clothes.

Six protesting eyes turn to the mother, "Need we? It is quite dry," exhibiting their caked stockings, petticoats, and trousers.

"You might try what a brush will do," replies she indifferently, overriding the paternal fiat.

The compromise is joyfully accepted, and the children drag off Lavinia with them, partly to aid in their purification, but chiefly to display to her the evidence of that patriotism which the joyful tidings of yesterday have called forth. For though averse from soap and water, the Misses and Master Darcy are avid of military glory, and the walls of the schoolroom, cheerful in its large shabbiness, are thick with South African heroes. Each child possesses and displays on the wall photographs of every general of any distinction; but as there are wide and envenomed differences of estimate as to the respective places occupied by those warriors in the hierarchy of fame, each has his or her special favourite enshrined in a showy frame, the centre of a circle of lesser lights, and the theme of many a wordy battle. To a stranger not acquainted with the fact that to a cult of glory the Darcy family add a taste for breeding poultry, and combine the two by naming their favourites of the farmyard after those of the battle-field, irrespective of differences of sex, it would be somewhat startling to hear that Colonel Baden-Powell has just begun to lay, and that General French is "such a good sitter that he can cover more eggs than any of the others."

But Miss Carew, since the inception of the campaign, had heard too many eye-opening facts in natural history of the kind adduced to turn a hair, and having admired the laurel wreaths beneath which disappears Lord Roberts, who alone of all his officers is allowed to keep his manhood, and is godfather to the Andalusian cock, she departs.

Her friend accompanies her to the gate, hatless, and having got rid of the children by a slight gesture of dismissal, instantly obeyed, despite the bite of February's still bitter tooth, that makes the winter aconites in the grass sink their round yellow heads chillily into their green capes, she loiters even when the limit of the Rectory demesne is reached; and Lavinia knows that she has something difficult of utterance to say to her.

"Has Sir George spoken to you about your marriage lately?"

"About my marriage?"

"Yes, anything as to the desirability of its coming off sooner on account of—what has happened?"

"On account of poor Bill's death, do you mean?"—looking blank and mystified. "No; why should he? What difference can that make?"

"You see that Rupert is the only one left now," replies Mrs. Darcy, gently, but in a rather embarrassed tone; "the only one to keep up the old name—to prevent its dying out."

Her companion is silent, staring at the humpy winter aconites with a vague feeling that they have grown into unfamiliar blossoms; that the gate-post

is strange too, and the mud in the road, and the rectoress's expressive pale face.

"I think he means to broach the subject to you before long," continues the latter, looking away from the person whom she is addressing, and speaking with a tentative delicacy; "so I thought it best that you should not be taken unawares when he does. I must be off. There is Richard signalling madly, and saying something quite *lay* about my unpunctuality." She runs off nodding; and Lavinia, much more slowly, takes her way home through the churchyard.

She feels as if some one—surely it cannot be the gentle friend made up of sense, sympathy, and *esprit*?—has given her a blow on the head with a cudgel. She has always known that she is to marry Rupert. The idea is perfectly familiar, and not the least unwelcome. To be his wife in the future is as inevitable a part of the scheme of life as to die. Up to five minutes ago, the one has appeared as vague and distant as the other. But to be married to him *soon*! To be married to him soon because the Campion family cannot be allowed to die out! It is by her union with him that it is to be preserved! It is her child, hers and Rupert's, who is to hand on the honoured name! Her very ears tingle and glow at the unfamiliar realism and animalism of the idea. It is only such a dotting of the *i*'s and crossing of the *i*'s that could make her realize what a nebulous thing, with no foothold in the world of reality, her engagement to her cousin has hitherto been. To be married to Rupert! That she should have a child, and that

it should be Rupert's! Her feelings are as yet much too chaotic for her to know whether the prodigious fact thrown by the magic-lantern of Mrs. Darcy's simple question upon the sheet of her imagination, belongs to the region of pleasure or pain. She knows only that she feels extraordinarily odd. The sight—normal and familiar as it is—of the person who has just been thrust upon her in so glaringly new a character, the sight of him standing, as he has stood many hundreds of times before, watching for her back-coming from the verandah, matter-of-fact and every-day as he looks, does not in the least lessen the queerness of her sensations.

"The Rectory, of course?" he says, with a sort of whimsical protest in his tone and eyebrows. Then, in an altered key of disturbed curiosity, "Why, what have they been doing to you? You look—I declare I do not know what you look like."

"Do not look at me, then," says she, trying to pass him with a brusque half-laugh; and, for the first time in her life, feeling uncomfortable beneath the scrutiny of his surprised eyes.

But he catches her before she can escape. "What *have* they been doing to you?"

"They have been telling me that Colonel Baden-Powell has begun to lay," replies she, deceitfully.

The confusion of sexes prevalent among the Darcy poultry is too familiar to the young man to raise a smile. He looses his detaining hold on his cousin's sleeve, and there is an accent of resigned distaste in his next words.

"Of course yesterday's news has brought on a

frightful access of khaki? I saw the flames of their bonfire insulting the evening sky last night."

"We ought to have had one too," she retorts, with a sudden rush of opposition.

"Have we so much cause to rejoice?" he asks; and there is such unaffected feeling in his voice that her heart smites her.

The recent emotion and the present one mix and produce her next sentence.

"You are the only one left now?"

"Yes." There is a faint inclination of surprise at her truism.

"If you died unmarried, at Uncle George's death the Campion family would be extinct?"

The surprise in the next "yes" is emphasized.

"But you are very young still?" she asks, as if in appeal from some maintenance of a contrary contention to him. "No one could expect you to marry *yet*?"

He looks back at her in dumb astonishment. Save in yesterday's laughing argument as to which of them had originally wooed the other, the question of their engagement has scarcely ever been referred to by her.

"And I am young too!" she goes on, in that puzzlingly pleading voice, as if still answering some invisible objector. "Most sensible people think that a woman should not marry before five and twenty!"

"Is this the Rectory?" he asks, in a tone where wonder seems to strive with a half-distrust.

"Must the Rectory supply *all* my ideas?" retorts

she, half-laughing, yet still with that new sense of constraint. "Mayn't I be allowed to have any of my own?"

He shakes his curly head—the head which is never shorn quite close enough to suit his father's taste.

"The voice is the voice of Lavinia; but the words are the words of Susan," he says, drily.

"She had an idea—built upon, I do not exactly know what"—reddening faintly at her own disingenuousness, and yet unable to break the lifelong habit of taking Rupert into her confidence—"that your father—that the change in—that poor Bill's death, in short, might make it desirable that we should——" She stops, jibbing at the matter-of-fact word which yet has always closed the vista of her lookings into the future as a thing of course.

Her companion supplies it, "Marry;" and to her ears it seems that an awkwardness like her own has remodulated his familiar voice.

There are more crocuses this year than last, pushing their yolk-yellow goblets through the grass; two or three have even invaded the gravel walk.

"Is the idea disagreeable to you?" asks the young man, in a key to whose agitated diffidence the girl is a stranger.

"Disagreeable! why should it be?" replies she, trying vainly to shake off the oppressive absurdity of that new shyness which has laid hands on them both. "Have not I been looking it in the face all my life? Didn't we agree yesterday that it was I who originally proposed to you?"

"You have had a good many accesses of hatred to me since then," he says hesitatingly.

"Yes, I have," replies she, hotly, both cheeks hanging out flame signals; "but you always know what produces them, and it lies with you to prevent them ever recurring. I hated you when I found that that wretched little pro-Boer poem in the *Shipton Herald* was by you; and I detested you when you said that if by any extraordinary accident you were killed on a battle-field, your wounds would certainly all be in the back!"

Her loss of self-control seems to give him back his.

"I got seven shillings and sixpence for my poem," he says good-temperedly. "And as for the battle-field, let us hope that my legs—they are good long ones—will carry me back unpeppered to your arms."

CHAPTER IV

LAVINIA tries to frown, but the whimsical way in which her cousin utters his disgraceful aspiration, coupled with her conviction that, if put to the test, he would prove how little his claim to consummate cowardice was worth, sends her into the dining-room with a smile on her face. The tone in which Sir George asks her what the joke is at once extinguishes it.

"Nothing worth repeating," she answers, grave, though suddenly.

"That means that I am not worth repeating it to!" he rejoins, with an injured look, and pushing away the dish that is being offered him.

"Won't you try it?" she asks persuasively. "They are eggs dressed according to the recipe Lang got from the *chef* at the Carlton."

He shakes his head. "I can't understand any one having an appetite when they have been penned up in the house all the morning."

Each of the three persons present, and probably the servants too, know that the remark is aimed at Rupert, whose sedentary habits are one of his father's chiefest grievances against him. It is a besetting sin of the outdoor members of a family

to look upon the indooriness of the indoor as a crime against themselves. But for once Rupert's conscience is clear.

"Were not you out, sir?" he asks pleasantly. "How did that come about? In spite of the sting in the air, one could quite realize that spring is only just round the corner."

"I was occupied," replies Sir George, briefly, not lifting the eyes overhung by lowering brows to his son's face from his own empty plate.

Both young people know what his occupation has been—the inditing, by a slow penman, of an infinitely difficult letter of thanks to the unknown soldier who had written to tell him of his dead first-born's last moments, and the tearing wider of his own yawning wound in the process. There is a respectful silence; Lavinia regretting her smile, and Rupert his question.

An almost imperceptibly exchanged eye-query between the two juniors asks what subject it would be safest to start next; and the thought flashes across Miss Carew of how perfectly Rupert always understands. How could she have had that odd shock of misgiving half an hour ago as to a union, however immediate—even if it were to-day or to-morrow—with one who always understands? And while luncheon proceeds this reassuring confidence deepens as she notes the tact and temper with which her betrothed steers among the rocks and quicksands that beset his path. How skilfully, yet without outraging truth, he conceals the fact that he had thought the wind cold enough to justify wearing

a great-coat—a garment which is always as a red rag waved before his father's hardy eyes ! With what smiling self-control he listens to that father's side-hits at the Molly Coddle and the Little Englander, though he knows that he is expected to answer to both names ! With what delicate intuition he follows each faintest hint of a dangerous trend in the talk ; and, lastly, with what a masterly air of naturalness he leads up to that poaching affray in Yorkshire which he had discovered, and which his father had not, lurking in the small type of the morning paper ! How much more thoroughly and subtly he knows Sir George than poor Bill did !—poor Bill, who could never resist the temptation to buck and rear under the whip of his father's jibes ! In sanguine forecast she prophesies to herself that her bufferdom will soon become a sinecure. If he could but be persuaded to give up that infuriating habit of jestingly—it must be, and is jestingly—belittling physical courage, and claiming for himself an absolute lack of it, Lavinia really does not see in what respect Rupert could be improved. This stout and happy mood lasts without a break until the repast ends ; and upholds her even when her uncle, with something that seems meaning in his manner, invites her to walk with him to the keeper's cottage. Let him broach the subject at once ! Thanks to Susan Darcy, she is prepared ; but, even without preparation, there would be nothing to cause her fear or hesitation. She will be ready with her answer as soon as he with his question.

“ Dear Rupert ! That speech about ‘yelping

curs' must have made him wince ; but with what admirable temper and fortitude he bore it ! Sir George himself must have felt a twinge of remorse for it, since, at starting, he had put his hand kindly on the young fellow's shoulder, and had said, 'Do not be out of the way, my boy, when we come back, as I may want to have a talk with you.' And poor Rupert had coloured up with pleasure. Living with him every day, it is only now and then that one realizes what charming sort of looks his are."

For the first half-hour of that walk, to which Miss Carew has thus valiantly braced herself, it seems as if her resolution were to be wasted, since her companion's thoughts are plainly running in a groove other than that for which Mrs. Darcy has prepared her. He stumps along, digging his stick into the muddy ground, in that perfect silence which is possible only to complete intimacy. Not till the high-road is left, and the King's Wood entered, does the little business of putting the quivering, tantalized Dachs Geist on the chain produce a word from him, and then it is only a "Steady, old man !" to the dog, who with moist nose working and upbraiding eyes, is testifying against the inhumanity of shackling him just when the sound of the rabbit begins to be loud in the land.

"Poor Geist !" says Lavinia, stooping to pat the satin of the long, low, red back. "Wait till we get to Madeley's, and you shall run the hens !"

This is a promise always made and never fulfilled at the entrance to the forbidden paradise ; but

it sends them all on in better spirits. Sir George half smiles, too, though he says disdainfully—

“*Geist!*”

The name has been bestowed by Rupert, in memory of Mat Arnold’s immortal favourite ; but as his father is equally unacquainted with the author and the poem, he can seldom forbear some ejaculation of contempt for so senseless an appellation ; and again the silence is unbroken, as they step along the ride between the undergrowth of Spanish chestnuts, through whose still adhering dead leaves the wind blows cracklingly. They are for use and beauty too, these chestnut growths. To-day they are a covert, warm and colourful ; to-morrow they will be hop-poles, round which the vine of England will wind the tenderness of her green embrace.

“We must try and get him here !” says Sir George, suddenly, arriving, as often happens, at a point in his ruminations when utterance to his one confidant is a relief, and without the slightest doubt that she will have followed the wordless course of his meditations, and be able to pick up his thought, whatever it may be, at the moment when he wishes it to become oral. She is mostly equal to the occasion ; and to-day divines at once that the allusion is to the young officer whom Bill had died to save.

“I am sure that he will wish to come,” she answers, in instantly ready response.

“You know, of course, to whom I am alluding ?” her uncle inquires, with one of those sharp turns of suspicion, even of her, to which he is liable.

"Surely to Captain Binning," she replies very softly.

"We have nothing to offer him when he does come," pursues her companion, gloomily—"no sport—nothing that a fine manly chap like that would care for. Twenty years ago it would have been a different thing!"

The sigh on which this speech is wafted tells the girl that her uncle's thoughts have gone back to the theme which had made him a sad and bitter man, even before the loss of his son—that passing of his ancestral acres into other hands, for which he has to thank his own early excesses.

"If Bobs hurries up the Union Jack over Bloemfontein and Pretoria as quickly as I expect of him!" cries she, sanguinely, with a kindling eye, "they may all be back before the summer is over!"

"*All!*" he repeats, with a reproachful laugh; and she shrinks back into a remorseful silence. It may be a dim regret at having choked the life out of her little effort to cheer him that makes Sir George say presently—

"If it were summer-time, he might put up with us for a day or two; and, I confess, I should like to make his acquaintance. From his letter, I should gather that he is just my sort—just what I should have liked——"

He breaks off, and her fatal facility in reading his thoughts makes her hear the unsaid half of the speech quite as plainly as the uttered one. "What I should have liked Rupert to be!" is the aspiration

which he uselessly forbears to finish. As on many former occasions, her spirit rises in defence.

"Don't you think," she asks gently, but with an intonation in which he recognizes a familiar protest, "that it would be rather dull if we were all made on precisely the same pattern? built on exactly the same lines?"

"There you go!" retorts he, laughing not quite naturally, yet with less than his former acridness; "up in arms at once, the moment you think your precious pet lamb is going to be attacked!"

"It is well that there should be somebody to speak up for him!" she says, carrying her head rather high, and looking very handsome and plucky.

"He has a bottle-holder whom he can always count upon in you!" replies Sir George, glowering sideways at her out of an eye in which displeasure at being opposed, and admiring fondness for the opposer, are at open war.

"Always!" she answers firmly; but, at the same moment, the dignity of her attitude is compromised by Geist, who, with crooked legs madly straddling, and choking bark out of a strained-at collar, forces his conductor into a run in pursuit of some small live thing which has set the dead leaves astir not a yard from his wildly working nose. Lavinia is a strong girl, but Geist is also a strong dog, and it takes her a minute or two to re-establish her supremacy.

"Though Rupert is such a favourite of yours," says Sir George, with a deliberation which shows that the remark is not an impromptu, "it does not

strike me that you are in any violent hurry to marry him."

The expected has come—the fully prepared and waited for, yet it must take her at an undefended angle. Possibly it is something jibing in the shape of the question that chills away her carefully pre-constructed response.

"Does whatever in the shape of an engagement once existed between you still hold good? or have you put an end to it?"

The something of hurry and apprehension that she detects in his voice, and in which she recognizes his last bid for possible happiness, affects her so strongly that she can only give a nod, which is apparently of so doubtful an interpretation that he misunderstands it.

"Do not be afraid to tell me if you have," he goes on with what she knows to be an unusual effort at self-control and temper. "I shall be the last person to blame you. I never could quite understand what you——"

"We belong to each other still: we always shall," she interrupts, in a low firm voice, hastening to stop the mouth that is about to utter a too familiar formula.

A sort of relief spreads over the lined face beside her; yet there is a cavilling discontent in his repetition of her phrase.

"*Belong* to each other! Well, you have done that, I suppose, according to your ideas, since you were both in long clothes."

She pauses, and a cloud seems to pass before

her clear strong eyes ; pauses with the feeling—an unaccountably heavy one—of being about to do something absolutely irrevocable, then speaks.

“Do you wish us to marry soon?”

He shoots a look at her to make sure that she is in earnest.

“I wish for a grandson!” he answers crudely.

Again she pauses, chiding herself as squeamish for a return of that sensation of repulsion which had assailed her when first the practical aspect of her relation to Rupert had been suggested to her by Mrs. Darcy. She has not conquered it when her uncle repeats and enlarges his phrase.

“I wish before I die to see a grandson growing up, with as much of you and as little of Rupert in him as you can make him!”

She listens with a half-shivering docility. Is it the strangeness, the something of coarse and homely in the wording of her uncle’s wish, that gives her this prudish and unreasonable sense of disrelish?

“No doubt you are laughing at the idea of wanting an heir when there is so precious little left to be heir to,” continues Sir George, in a key half angry at her delay in acquiescence, half appealing to her mercy. “But when you have got one spot of earth into your very bones, you do not like the idea of being quite wiped off from it.”

Their steps have led them to a clearing in the low wood, and over the ground bared by the woodman’s axe the old man’s eye, mournful and yearning, wanders, embracing the pleasant swelling hills, the strawberry gardens, and cherry orchards, upon which

his sire's eyes, nay, his own boyish ones, had rested possessively. A Jew broker's improved ploughs are furrowing yon hillside ; a Half-penny Comic Journal sends the strawberries to Covent Garden ; but to his own sad heart, pasture and copse and red roof-tree, are Campion's still. Lavinia's eye follows the direction her uncle's has taken. The Kentish landscape, with its rustic smile is nearly as dear, though not as melancholy, to her as to him. The idea of living in any other surroundings is as unfamiliar to her as the wish. "The thing that hath been shall be." To go on living and doing for her men—since there are now only two left, she must make the most of them—what other fate has ever occurred to her as possible ? For as long as she can remember the thought of what she herself would like has been always subordinated to the wishes, divined or expressed, of her menkind. In so small a thing as the ordering of dinner, has her own palate ever in half a score of years, been asked to give an assent or a veto ?

To marry Rupert ! To bear and bring up his children—a transient wonder crosses her mind as to whether there is any likelihood of their being as amusing and original as the young Darcys !—for what other end was she created ? There is no sting or thrill in her feeling for him ; but is it the worse for that ? There are women incapable of thrilling for any man—a large, cool, comfortable class, to which she does and must belong. Has her pulse ever paid any man the tribute of one quickened beat ? Proudly to herself she can answer No. She

is not of that kind. With Féodorovna Prince as an object-lesson, there is not much fear of her erring in the direction of passion or sentimentality. She involuntarily lifts her head a little above its usual level—though it is always handsomely carried—and, since the thought-current that has run through her brain has done so with lightning's own speed, there is to her hearer's ear scarcely any delay in her answer.

"I am ready to marry Rupert whenever you and he wish me to."

Her voice is steady and serene; at least so she intends and believes it to be. Yet Sir George looks at her askance.

"*Ready!*" he repeats distrustfully. "A man, if he has any pluck, may be *ready* to go to the gallows!"

Lavinia makes a face between a laugh and a frown.

"Choose your own words," she says, the habit of a lifetime controlling and smoothing away any outward expression of impatience.

But he will not let her off. "Are you *glad* to marry him? Do you feel that it is essential to your happiness?" he asks, pressing home his inquiries with a persistency that he imagines to be conscientious, but which she feels to be cruel and perverse.

"*Glad!*" she repeats, dragging out the word a little, to give herself time to find the right phrase of tactful truth. "Haven't I always been glad that I was to be part and parcel of you both? My gladness is no shoddy new thing."

He looks at her captiously, the unhappy bent

of his disposition causing him to feel a half-distrust of the candid eyes and the honest voice that yet always bring a warmth about his heart.

"If Rupert does not marry you, he will probably marry some one else," he growls. "And between you and me, I cannot quite depend on his taste!"

It is said with no wounding intention. Never would it have occurred to the father that any one could take exception against him for making disparaging comments on his own son of his body begotten; but used as she is to them, never does Lavinia fail to protest.

"I like his taste," she answers pleasantly and gallantly. "He thinks me very good-looking."

But her companion's thought stumps undistracted by her playfulness along its own track, as doggedly as his feet along the bridle-path.

"I am not difficult to get on with," he says, in a *naïf* unconsciousness of his own corners which makes his niece throttle a smile. "No one can deny that I am easy to live with; but I could not answer for myself if he sprang upon me some demi-rep from a music-hall or some screeching platform woman. I declare to goodness"—lashing himself up into unreasonable anger—"it seems an odd thing for a father to say, but I know so little of the fellow—of what goes on inside him—that I could not say, if I were to be shot for it, which alternative is the more likely one."

It would be perfectly useless to tell him that it is he himself who has crushed the power of confidence out of his son; and the desire to impart

the information to him is at once stamped upon by Lavinia. All that is left of it escapes in a patient sigh, and the little dry sentence—

“I should say that they were about equally probable.”

“I have a still better reason for wishing to see you coupled together,” continues Sir George, a little appeased, though not in the least suspecting the exercise of self-control that has tightened Lavinia’s lips, and strengthened her grip upon Geist’s lead. “If you do not marry *my* boy, of course you will never rest till you marry some one else’s.”

“Never rest till I marry some one else’s!” repeats she, indignantly, all her virgin pride up in arms; but in a second her wrath falls, vanquished by native sweetness, and by a long and sore acquaintance with the properties of Uncle George’s jokes. To-day it is not quite a joke. It is the vehicle for a real apprehension. She is paid for her self-government in a ready money which does not often distinguish the discharge of debts to virtue.

“And then I should lose my little mosquito,” he says, employing a phrase of no visible aptness to the tall and gracious creature beside him, which she yet welcomes as a proof of peculiar favour. “No doubt my loss would be your gain, as people say when other people’s relatives die”—laughing unctuously. “But I do not think I could carry creditably anything more just yet. You see I have lost a good deal one way and another.”

There is pathos in his growling voice, and appeal

in his shagged eyes, and Lavinia at once feels that she would gladly die for him.

"It is settled, then!" she cries with a cheerfulness concerning which she is not quite sure whether she feels it or not. "Rupert marries Lavinia to prevent *her* marrying any one else, and Lavinia marries Rupert to prevent his marrying any one else, and the bells ring, and we are all happy for ever after!"

Her one motive in drawing up this gay programme is to give him pleasure, to chase the hopelessness out of his gaunt face; and perhaps she overdoes the content of her tone, for he stops in his walk to send the gimlet of his suspicious eyes through her.

"It is not to please me that you are doing it," he says with sharp contrariety: "mind that! I would be shot before I would influence you a hairbreadth one way or the other in such a matter. And between you and me"—it is the phrase which usually precedes some unflattering observation upon his son—"if I were a young woman, and Rupert were the last man in the world——"

But what Sir George's course as a young woman would be his niece is determined for once not to hear.

"Stop!" she says, laying her firm hand in prohibition upon his arm, and speaking with an authority that for the moment seems to reverse their relative positions. "You must not run down my husband to me!"

CHAPTER V

THE hall-door reveals an unwelcome sight, though no one can deny that it is a showy one, nor that the February sunlight is snobbish enough to treble itself against the brazen glories of the crests on blinker and harness and panel of the Princes' carriage. It is a fact of disagreeable familiarity to both uncle and niece that Féodorovna Prince will never allow any of her acquaintance to be "not at home ;" and that to be pursued to study, toilet-table, and bed is the penalty exacted from those upon whom she chooses to inflict her friendship. The two exchange a look.

"Do not let her come near me," says the man, in accents of peremptory disgust, and so flings off to his den ; while Lavinia, with the matter-of-fact unselfishness of the well-broken human female, goes smiling into the drawing-room.

After all, it is not Féodorovna, but her mother, who comes forward alone, and with jet-clinking apology.

"You do not mind ? It is not a thing that one has any right to do ? But Féodorovna would insist on getting out, so I got out too."

At another moment this exegesis, pregnant in

its unconscious brevity of the relations between mother and daughter, would have made Lavinia laugh ; but at the present moment a horrible suspicion freezes all tendency to mirth.

“Féodorovna !”—looking round in bewildered apprehension. “Why, where is she ?”

The visitor is so obviously in no hurry to answer, that Miss Carew’s question repeats itself with an imperativeness that drags out the reluctant and frightened response.

“Well, my dear, you must not scold me, as I see you are inclined ; or, if you do, it will be grossly unjust. You know what she is when she takes a thing into her head, and I am bound to say she does feel, and has felt, very keen sympathy for him in his trouble ; indeed, we all have.”

She pauses, weakly hoping for some expression of thanks or reassurance ; but Lavinia only stares at her with confusing sternness in her aghast blue eyes.

“And when she heard that the things had come back—poor Bill’s things—I believe the news came through the servants—nothing would serve her but that she must see Sir George, to tell him how much she felt for him. You know that she has that curious *personal* feeling about the whole of our Army in South Africa, as if it belonged to her in a way, and she always rated Bill very highly.”

Again the mother pauses, with a hope—but a fainter one than its predecessor—that this tribute to the dead may have a mollifying effect upon her inconveniently silent and staring young hostess.

"And where is she now?" asks Lavinia, with an accent that makes Mrs. Prince regret her silence.

"She said she would go to Sir George's room to wait for him; that she was sure he would prefer that there should be no witnesses to their meeting. Oh, do not go after her!"—with a despairing clutch at Lavinia's raiment as the latter makes a precipitate movement doorwards. "It is too late now; and, after all, Sir George, poor man, is very well able to take care of himself. And if he gives her a real good snub, why, so much the better."

Lavinia pauses, arrested by the something of sound sense that leavens her companion's flurried speech, and with a dawning pity in her relenting eyes.

"And there is something I want so much to say to you," goes on the poor woman, hanging on to the skirt of her advantage, though wisely relinquishing her material grasp. "You know that I always bring my troubles to you, and I am in a fresh one now."

"About her, of course?"

"Oh yes; about her, of course. I suppose that but for her things would have gone almost too smoothly with Mr. Prince and me. I suppose that the Almighty sees we need her to prevent us getting too—too uppish."

The adjective is scarcely on the level of refinement held before her own eyes by the poor lady, but the tear that moistens condones it.

"What is it now?" asks the girl, with a resolute banishing to the back of her mind of the intense

annoyance and apprehension caused by the odious intrusion of Féodorovna, and sitting down beside her guest with resolute and patient sympathy.

"I never look at her letters," says Mrs. Prince, lowering her voice, which has taken on a tone of eager relief. "You know I do not ; but she had left it with her others for the butler to stamp. He had it in his hand ; it was at the top. I could not help seeing the address."

"Not *again* ? She has not been writing to General —— *again* ?"

The expression of tragic repulsion in her young companion's face seems to get upon Mrs. Prince's nerves.

"How you do jump down one's throat !" she cries peevishly. "No, of course she has not !"

"It was stupid of me to suggest it ! To whom, then ?"

"I really could not help seeing," continues the elder woman, mollified and apologetic for her own action. "It was no case of prying, but I could not help reading, 'Surgeon-General Jameson, Army Medical Department, Victoria Street, Westminster.'"

There is a pregnant pause.

"Surgeon-General Jameson !" repeats Lavinia. "He is Director-General of the R.A.M.C., isn't he ?"

The plumed toque that crowns Mrs. Prince's expensive toupet gives a dejected dip of assent.

"Does she know him ?"

"Not from Adam. But that would never stop her writing to any one ; no, nor speaking to them either !"

Another pause.

"She wants to go out to South Africa as a nurse, I suppose?"

Again the tall ostrich feathers wave acquiescence. This time a spoken elucidation follows.

"That is it, as far as we—her father and I—can make out."

Lavinia draws a little nearer, and lays her hand upon the arm of her visitor's chair, while her chin lifts itself, and then falls again in a movement of hopeless pity.

"I am very sorry indeed for you both! How does Mr. Prince take it? What does he say?"

"You can never get much out of Mr. Prince," replies his wife, in a tone whose complaint is streaked with admiration for a verbal continence of which she feels herself quite incapable. "But he did say, in his dry way, that he should be sorry to be one of Féo's patients."

Lavinia smiles, but cautiously; and then, illuminated by a sudden suggestion of valid consolation, speaks.

"You may make your mind easy, they will never accept her! She has none of the qualifications."

A slightly soothed expression comes over the visitor's perturbed features.

"It seems an odd thing to say of one's own child, but I must say that there is no one that I would not rather have about me than Féo when I am at all poorly; and Mr. Prince is just the same."

"Then do not waste time in worrying!" says

Lavinia, with bracing cheerfulness ; herself encouraged by the success of her mode of reassurance. "She will infallibly get a polite No for her answer, and you will never hear anything more about it."

"You are wrong there," replies Féodorovna's mother with rueful shrewdness. "She is sure to tell us about it. Féo has an odd way of boasting about things that other people would be ashamed of!"

"It is impossible to contradict this assertion, and with a passing wonder and pity for a love cursed with such good eyes, Lavinia repeats, in despair of finding anything better, her already-tried-and-found-wanting anodyne.

"Well, at all events, nothing will come of it."

"And what will her next move be? I ask you that! What will her next move be?" inquires Mrs. Prince, in dreary triumph.

The pride of having proposed an insoluble riddle kindles a funeral torch in each eye. The question, as the too clear-sighted parent had expected, *stumps* Miss Carew, nor can any of the hysterical indelicacies which pass through her mind as likely to illustrate Féodorovna's future course be decently dressed enough to be presented as hypotheses to Féodorovna's mother.

It is the occasion of her dilemma who cuts it short by an entrance a good deal less aspen-like and deliberate than is usual in her case. It is, of course, an extravagant trick of fancy, but the impression is at once conveyed to at least one of the occupants of the drawing-room that Féodorovna has been kicked

into the room. The pink umbrage in her silly face confirms the idea of some propelling force behind her, as does the excessive civility of the attendant Rupert. That the deferential *empressement* of his manner is the cover for an inclination towards ungovernable, vexed laughter is suspected only by Lavinia. That some catastrophe has attended the visit of the young paraclete is obvious to the meanest observer; but it is not until after the Princes' carriage has crunched and flashed away with Féodovna reclining in swelling silence upon the cushion, and her mother casting glances of frightened curiosity at her infuriated profile that the details of the disaster reach Lavinia's ears. Not immediately even then, since before she can besiege her cousin with terrified questions, he is summoned to his father; and it is fully half an hour before he rejoins her in the school-room. She has to wait again even then; since at her first allusion to the subject, he is seized with such a *fou rire* that he has to roll on his face on the old sofa before he can master the shoulder-shaking convulsions of his uncomfortable mirth.

"What happened?" cries the girl, standing over her *fiancé's* prostrate figure in a fever of apprehension. "Oh, do get up, and stop laughing! What is there to laugh at? You are too stupid to live!"

"I shall not live much longer!" replies the young man, rearing himself up into a sitting posture, and presenting a subdued but suddenly grave surface to his censor; "not if we are often to have such treats as this. I do not know why I laugh, for I never felt less hilarious in my life."

"You are as hysterical as a woman!" says Lavinia, with a frown.

"It is not my fault, though it is my eternal regret that I am not one!" he retorts.

It is lucky for him that the fever of her pre-occupation prevents Lavinia from hearing this monstrous aspiration.

"Did he do anything *violent*?" she asks in a voice made low by dread.

"He kept his hands off her, if you mean that!" replies Rupert, showing symptoms of a tendency to relapse into his convulsion of laughter; "but only *just*! If I had not appeared in the nick of time, I would not have answered for her life!" Then, as Lavinia keeps looking at him in smileless tragedy, he goes on, "I was hanging about, waiting for him, as you know he had told me that he should have something to say to me—by-the-by, he has just been saying it, but that is another story—when I heard raised voices, or rather a raised voice. You know that long, dull roar of his that always makes me call on the hills to cover me!"

"Well?"

"I felt that there was no time to be lost, so I hurried in—only just in time! I saw in his eye that the next moment he would have her by the shoulders, and be thrusting her through the door."

"But he did not! you stopped him?"—breathlessly.

"Yes, thank the Lord!" He pauses, and his lips begin to twitch with nervous mirth. "I know what you thought: she was shot into the dining-room

like a projectile ; but it was not as bad as that. Only *moral* force propelled her."

Lavinia brings her hands together with a sort of clap, but relief mingles with the indignant animosity of her tone.

"What *had* she said ? What *had* she done ?"

Rupert shrugs his shoulders. "What is our little Féo *not* capable of saying and doing ?" he asks sarcastically. "But you must remember I came in only for the bouquet of the fireworks." After a pause, in a key of real feeling, with no tinge of satire, "Poor old fellow ! I would have done a good deal to save him from it. I think the last straw was when she began to finger the things—Bill's poor little possessions—and to imply, if she did not exactly assert, that his death was quite as great a blow to her as to the old man."

"And when we remember what Bill's estimate of her was !" cries Lavinia, reddening with indignation. "Oh, if we could but tell her of his saying that he should have to put barbed wire round himself whenever he went outside the gate to prevent her getting at him !"

They both laugh—the little rueful laugh with which the jests of the departed are recalled.

"After they had gone," pursues Rupert, "when he sent for me, I found him still in a terrible state. I have never seen him in such an ungovernable fury. Not with me—to me he was like a pet lamb."

Again they both laugh a little grimly, conscious of the extreme audacity of the comparison.

"You will not believe it," says Rupert, half

humorously, and yet with a quiver of emotion on his sensitive face, "but he actually *thanked* me for coming to his rescue! *Me*, if you please, *moi qui vous parle!*"

"It is an ill wind that blows nobody any good," replies Lavinia, cheerfully, but with conscious effort, and with the feeling, often before experienced, that a good deal of physical fatigue attends living over the crater of Etna."

"He calmed down after a while. I spent all the bad language I was master of, and wished it had been more, upon the whole Prince clan; and that did him good, so much so that he was able by-and-by to talk of something else."

"Of what else?" The question is an idle one, and Miss Carew is conscious of it.

So is Rupert. "I expect that you know," he answers quietly.

Never until to-day has Lavinia felt *gêne* in the presence of her lifelong playfellow and comrade, and that she should do so now strikes her as so monstrous an anomaly that it must be treated drastically.

"About our marriage, do you mean?" she inquires, taking the bull by the horns, and looking him full in the face.

"Yes."

"H'm!" Struggle as she may, her lips can produce nothing more forthcoming than the monosyllable.

"He asked me whether the engagement still existed?"

"So he did me."

"Whether we had any intention of fulfilling it?"

"Ditto!"

"Whether it was essential to our happiness?"

"Essential to our happiness," repeats she, as if it were a dictation lesson.

"He said that we were all that he had left in the world."

Lavinia nods, speech seeming difficult. Is Rupert going to recapitulate, in his father's unsparing Saxon, the reason for that father's anxiety to see them wed? She waits in rosy dread. It is a moment or two before relief comes.

"He ended by adjuring me not to marry you in order to please him. I think I was able to reassure him as to that not being my primary inducement."

They know each other far too well for her not to be instantly aware of an alteration in his voice—not to have an instant's flashed certainty that the playmate, the comrade, the brother-cousin, is gone, and that the lover stands full-fledged in their stead before her. Whether the conviction causes her pain or pleasure, she could not tell you. She only feels as she has done in the morning, but a thousandfold more so, that the situation is overpoweringly *odd*.

"Well!" she says slowly, afraid to look away from him, lest she should never again be able to lift her stupidly rebellious eyes to his.

"I suppose it was bound to come, some time or other?"

It is not an effusive mode of acquiescence.

"Have you nothing more to say about it?"

If she had had any doubt as to the final banishment out of her life of the boy-comrade, the method of this question, and a certain reproachful enterprise divined in the asker's eye, would have banished it.

"What more is there to say?" she returns in troubled haste. "What more than we have been saying all our lives, in a way?" Then, with a sudden impulsive throwing herself on his judgment and mercy, "I suppose we *do* feel all right, don't we?"

CHAPTER VI

"I love nothing so well as you !
Is not that strange ?"

RUPERT is "all right." Of that there can be no question. It turns out now that he has been "all right" for as long as he can remember. The discovery that it is only his delicacy and self-command that have hitherto hindered his manifesting his "all-rightness" practically, fills Lavinia with such admiring gratitude as makes her almost certain that she is "all right" too. She has no female friend with whom to compare notes, nor would she do so if she had, her one intimate, Mrs. Darcy, being very far from belonging to that not innumerable band of matrons who enjoy revealing the secrets of their own prison-house to a selected few. Lavinia has to work out her problem for herself. Not betrothed only now, but going to be married, with a tray of engagement-rings crawling down from London by the South-Eastern for approval, with a disinterring by Sir George, from his dead wife's presses, of wedding laces——

Lavinia wishes that Rupert did not take quite so great an interest in the latter, and did not know quite so much about Point de Venise, Point de

Flanders, and Point d'Angleterre— ; with interesting and illumining comparison of past feelings, and with a respectable modicum of kisses. If the candour of her nature, and the knowledge of how perfectly useless it is to lie to a person who knows her so through and throughly as Rupert, compel her to acknowledge that these latter do not cause her any particular elation, she is able truly to answer him that she does not dislike them so much as to forbid a frugal repetition. Once or twice, touched and stung to generosity by his unselfish refraining from even the dole of allowed endearments, she takes the initiative ; and at other times consoles him for her want of fervour by assuring him, with emphatic words, and the crystal clearness of her kind, cold eyes, that she is “ not that sort.”

She is wondering to-day whether, when she left him five minutes ago at the lych-gate, he did not look as if he were getting a little tired of the explanation. It ought to be thoroughly satisfactory to him, for, after all, you can't give more than you have ; but she has never been in the habit of crossing or discontenting her men, and to be found not up to the expected mark in the matter of endearment vexes her as much as to be convicted of neglecting their buttons or slurring their dinner.

It is a week since Miss Carew has paid the visit, usually a daily or bi-daily one, to the Rectory. The unwonted absence for three days from her monopolizing husband and boisterous brood of Mrs. Darcy, partly accounts for this omission ; and not even to herself does Lavinia own that she is in a less hurry

than usual to greet her returned ally. Rupert is never in any great hurry to see Susan, and has gracefully declined to accompany his *fiancée* on her present errand of announcement.

"You shall tell me about it when you come back. I shall like to hear how her face lights up when she hears the good news," he says with a half-sarcastic smile; then, seeing the girl wince a little at this hitting of a nail all too soundly on the head, he laughs it off pleasantly. "Tell her, as you told me, that it was 'bound to come.'"

"Mine was certainly a very original way of accepting an offer," replies Lavinia, slightly flushing. Never since the decisive day has she felt quite at her ease with Rupert, and so goes off laughing too; but the laugh disappears as soon as she is out of sight.

The day is full of hard spring light, which shows up, among other revelations, the emptiness of the Rectory drawing-room, with its usual refined litter of needlework and open books, and the figures of the children in the chicken-yard, whither a spirit of search and inquiry leads Lavinia's feet. From her friend's young family she hears that their mother has gone up the village to bandage a cut hand; but it is with difficulty that this information is extracted from them, so vociferously preoccupied are they with their own affairs. Gloriously happy, covered with mud, hatless, dishevelled, blissful, speaking all at once, they reveal to her, in shouting unison, the solid grounds for their elation—nurse gone off at a moment's notice, governess's return indefinitely postponed, mother busy, father absent!

"Oh, Lavy, we *are* having such a good time, particularly at tea! Serena has tea with us."

Serena's age is two years, and detractors say that her Christian name must have been bestowed with an ironical intention.

"And no doubt you spoil her very much?"

"No," thoughtfully; "we do not spoil her. We only try to make her as naughty as we can."

Their visitor smiles at the nice distinction, and weakly shrinking from pointing out the immorality of the course of conduct described, judiciously changes the topic by asking why the flag on the henhouse is flying half-mast high.

She is at once informed by grave voices that there has been a court-martial, and that General Forestier Walker is to have his neck wrung for breaking his eggs.

"General — was the presiding judge," says Phillida, pointing to a peaceable-looking white Dorking matron, making the gravel fly behind her with the backward sweep of her scratching feet. "He is Féo Prince's general. She told me, last time she was here, that she had asked him to marry her."

"As if he would be thinking of such tommy-rot as marriage now!" cries Chris, more struck, apparently, by the ill-timing of the overture than its indelicacy.

"Miss Brine was shocked," says Phillida, thoughtfully. "She said that it was putting the cart before the horse, and that Féo ought to have waited for him to speak first."

"But if he wouldn't?" cries little Daphne, swinging Lavinia's hand, which she has annexed,

to and fro, and staring up with the puzzled violet of her round eyes.

They all laugh.

"That is unanswerable," says Lavinia, blushing even before the children at this new instance of Féodorovna's monstrous candour; adding, in a not particularly elate key, as her glance takes in a *recherché* object nearing their little group across the white grass of the still wintry glebe, "Why, here is Féo!"

"They told me your mother was out," says the visitor, as if this were a sufficient explanation for her appearance.

The children greet her with the hospitable warmth which nature and training dictate towards *any* guest, *qua* guest, but without the exuberant, confident joy with which they always receive Lavinia. However, they repeat the tale of General Forestier Walker's crime and fate, and add, as peculiarly interesting to their hearer, the name of the presiding judge.

Féodorovna listens with an absence of mind and eye which she does not attempt to disguise.

"I was coming on to you," she says, addressing Lavinia, and turning away with an expression of boredom from her polite little hosts. "I should have asked you to give me luncheon, but since I find you here, it does as well."

Neither in voice nor manner is there any trace of the resentment that Miss Carew is guiltily feeling. Féodorovna never resents. Too well with herself often to perceive a slight, and too self-

centred to remember it, Lavinia realizes with relief that all recollection of the peril Miss Prince's shoulders had run at Sir George's all-but ejecting hands has slidden from that fair creature's memory.

"I went to London yesterday," she says, turning her back upon the cocks and hens, and their young patrons, as unworthy to be her audience.

"We saw you drive past," says Phillida, innocently; "you went by the 11.30 train. We were not looking out for you; we were watching Lavy and Rupert. From mother's bedroom we can see right into their garden."

"Can you, indeed?" interposes the voice of Mrs. Darcy, who has come upon the little group unperceived by the short cut from the village. "I am glad you told me, as I shall try for the future to find some better employment for your eyes."

Her voice is quite quiet, and not in the least raised; but the children know that she is annoyed, and so does Lavinia, who, with a flushed cheek and an inward spasm of misgiving, is trying to reconstruct her own and her *fiancé's* reciprocal attitudes at eleven o'clock of yesterday's forenoon. To them all for once Féodorovna's unconscious and pre-occupied egotism brings relief.

"I was telling Lavinia that I went to London yesterday."

"For the day? to buy chifbons? I suppose I shall have to reclothe this ragged regiment soon," looking round ruefully at her still somewhat abashed offspring, and avoiding her friend's eye.

"Chifbons! oh no!" a little contemptuously.

"I went up to see the Director-General of the Army Medical Department."

"Indeed! Is he a friend of yours?"

"Oh dear no; I went on business."

"To offer your services as a nurse, I suppose?" replies Mrs. Darcy, as if suggesting an amusing absurdity, and unable to refrain from stealing a look at Lavinia, while her own face sparkles with mischievous mirth.

"Exactly," replies Féodorovna, with her baffling literalness. "I sent up my name, and he saw me almost at once." She pauses.

"And you made your proposal?"

"Yes."

"He accepted it?"

Féodorovna's pale eyes have been meeting those of her interlocutor. They continue to do so, without any shade of confusion or mortification.

"No; he refused it point-blank."

As any possible comment must take the form of an admiring ejaculation addressed to the medical officer in question, Susan bites her lips to ensure her own silence.

"He put me through a perfect catechism of questions," continues Miss Prince, with perfect equanimity. "Had I had any professional training?"

"You haven't, have you?"

"I answered that I hadn't, but that I could very easily acquire some."

"And he?"

"Oh, he smiled, and asked me if I had any natural aptitude."

“Yes?”

“I answered, ‘None, but that no doubt it would come.’”

The corners of Mrs. Darcy’s mouth have got so entirely beyond her control that she can only turn one imploring appeal for help to Lavinia, who advances to the rescue.

“And then?” she asks, with praiseworthy gravity.

“Oh, then he shrugged his shoulders and answered drily, ‘I have had three thousand applications from ladies, from duchesses to washerwomen, which I have been obliged to refuse. I am afraid that I must make yours the three thousand and first;’ and so he bowed me out.”

She ends, her pink self-complacency unimpaired, and both the other women look at her in a wonder not untouched with admiration. Neither of them succeeds in making vocal any expression of regret.

“It is one more instance of the red tapeism that reigns in every department of our military administration,” says Miss Prince, not missing the lacking sympathy, and with an accent of melancholy superiority. “Next time I shall know better than to ask for any official recognition.” After a slight pause, “It is a bitter disappointment, of course; more acute to me naturally than it could be to any one else.”

With this not obscure intimation of the end she had had in view in tendering her services to the troops in South Africa, Féodorovna departs. The two depositaries of her confidence look at each other

with faces of unbridled mirth as soon as her long back is turned ; but there is more of humorous geniality and less of impartial disgust in the matron's than the maid's.

"Poor thing ! I wonder what it feels like to be so great a fool as that !" said Mrs. Darcy, with a sort of lenient curiosity. "I declare that I should like to try for the hundredth part of a minute !"

"She meant to nurse him !" ejaculates Lavinia, with a pregnant smile. "Poor man ! If he knew what he had escaped !"

"And now, what next ?" asks Susan, spreading out her delicate, hardworking hands, and shaking her head.

"What next ?" as the tadpole said when his tail dropped off !" cries Daphne, pertly—a remark which, calling their parent's attention to the edified and cock-eared interest of her innocents, leads to their instant dispersal and flight over the place towards the pre-luncheon wash-pot, which they hoped to have indefinitely postponed. When they are out of sight and earshot.

"You came to tell me something ?" Mrs. Darcy says, with an entire change of tone. "Though I am not in the habit of watching Rupert and Lavy from an upper chamber, like those graceless brats, I know what it is."

"Then I may spare myself the trouble of telling you," answers the girl, in a key of constrained and artificial playfulness.

Her friend's kind eyes, worn, yet with the look of a deep, serene contentment underlying their

surface fatigue, look at her with a compassionate interrogation.

"Are you doing it to please yourself?" she asks in a low voice, yet not hesitatingly.

"Whom else?"

"It is a motive that has so very seldom guided you," replies the elder woman, with an enveloping look of motherly solicitude. "And in this kind of case it is the only one that is of the least value; it is the one occasion in life in which it is one's bounden duty to be absolutely selfish!"

"Were you absolutely selfish when you married Mr. Darcy?" asks Lavinia, carrying the war into the enemy's quarters, and with an apposite recalling of all the sacrifices that her friend—once a very smart London girl—is rumoured by the neighbourhood to have been called upon to make by her choice.

"Absolutely," replies Susan, with the stoutness of the most unmistakable truth. "Everybody belonging to me cried, and said they could not see what I saw in Richard; but *I* saw what I saw in him, and I knew that that was all that mattered."

"Perhaps *I* see what I see in Rupert," replies Lavinia, plucking up her spirit, and detecting a joint in her companion's harness, though her own voice is not assured.

"If you do, of course it is all right," rejoins the other, unelastically.

Lavinia's head would like to droop, so oppressive is the sense of the cold doubt infiltrated into her own acquiescent serenity; but she forces it to hold itself up against its will.

"He is quite aware that we have your disapproval," she says with a dignity that is native to her; "so much so that he advised me to tell you it was 'bound to come.'"

Mrs. Darcy looks at her sadly; but without either apology or contradiction.

"That is just what I do not feel."

"You have always done him scant justice!" cries the girl, stung into hotter partisanship by the chill whisper of a traitor within her own camp. "After all, it is I, not you, that am to marry him."

"Yes, it is you;" in downcast assent.

"When you have praised him it has always been in some damning way," pursues Lavinia, breaking more and more into flame—"saying what a good judge of lace he is, and how well he mended your Bow teapot!"

"So he did."

"How would you like it, if, when some one asked my opinion of Mr. Darcy as a parish priest, I answered that he did not make bad cabbage-nets?"

Susan smiles reluctantly. "Do not let us quarrel," she says. "As long as I supply you with eggs, it would be inconvenient to you; and, as for me, why, I might break another teapot!"

* * * * *

"Well, how did she take it?" asks Rupert, who has apparently been waiting the whole time of his betrothed's absence in contented smoking and musing under the immemorial yews of the churchyard.

"She asked me whether I am marrying you to please myself?" replies Lavinia, lifting eyes in which he notes a trouble that had not clouded them when he parted from her, in an almost doglike wistfulness of appeal to his, "Am I, Rupert?"

"Our friends ask us very indelicate questions," he answers, turning away.

* * * * *

A day or two later Lavinia has a casual meeting with Mrs. Prince in the road.

"Whom do you think she has been writing to now?" asks Féodorovna's parent, leaning over the side of the victoria, and whispering loudly. "The Officer Commanding Cavalry Dépôt, Canterbury! What can she have to say to him?"

CHAPTER VII

SPRING has come ; even according to the Almanack, which is later in its sober estimate of the seasons, and also truer than the sanguine poets. But as to April 23 there can be no difference of opinion between prose and verse. To the curious observer of the English spring it may seem every year harder to decide whether the frank brutality of March, the crocodile tears of April, or the infinite treacheries of May, are the more trying to the strained planks of the British constitution ? Through this course of tests, unescapable, except by flight, the village of Campion is passing like its neighbours. But in the Egypt of the east wind, there has been revealed, on this 23rd of April, the existence of a Goshen.

“ ‘ Don’t cast a clout till May is out ! ’ ” says Lavinia, taking off her jacket and giving it to Rupert to carry. “ It is impossible to act up to that axiom to-day ! ”

The action, in its matter-of-factness, might be taken to prove that Lavinia is still in that brief and tantalizing portion of a woman’s existence, when tyrant man is a willing packhorse ; though, in Rupert’s case, the indication is worth nothing. In point of fact, they are still unwed. This is due to

no jibbing on the part of Miss Carew. The engagement-ring has not crawled back to London by a South-Eastern express, the yellowed Mechlin has not returned to its camphored privacy, the cousins are still "going to be married." The delay has come from the person whose feverish eagerness had at first seemed to brook no moment of waiting.

"Of course, I can't expect any one else to share the feeling," Sir George has said to the bridegroom-elect, when he has innocently alluded to the marriage as an event in the near future ; "but I cannot help thinking there is some indecency in feasting and merry-making when the eldest son of the house is scarcely cold in his grave !"

Rupert is used to the sharp turnings and break-neck hills of his father's utterances, but at this he cannot help looking a little blank.

"I thought it was your wish, sir," he answers.

"If it is only because I wish it that you are marrying Lavinia, as I have already told you, I think the whole thing had better be off !" retorts Sir George, with another surprising caper of the temper ; adding, in a voice of wounded protest that thinks it is temperate and patient, "I ask for a decent delay between an open grave and a carouse, and you fly off at once into a passion !"

"Bid the Rectory light its bonfire—the bonfire it is getting ready against the Relief of Mafeking !" says Rupert, returning to the drawing-room, where Lavinia is sitting arduously working out a new patience—it is after dinner. "Tell Susan to deck her

countenance in its brightest smiles. The wedding is indefinitely postponed !”

“Is it?” she answers, looking up from her cards. “You do not say so !” Then, afraid that the colourless ejaculation is not quite up to the mark, she adds, in a tone where his too-sharp ear detects rather the wish to cheer him than any personal annoyance. “But it will be on again to-morrow. He is quite as keen about it as you—or I.”

Once again that too officious ear tells him of the almost imperceptible hiatus that parts the pronouns.

“Come and help me !” she adds, divining in him some little jarred sensitiveness ; and, resting the tranquil friendliness of her eyes upon him, while her hand pulls him down to a seat beside her. “I can’t recollect whether this is red upon black, or if one follows suit.”

That was weeks ago, and Lavinia’s prophecy is fulfilled. On this 23rd of April she has the knowledge that only five weeks of maidenhood remain to her. No sooner had Sir George paid his ill-tempered tribute to his dead son, and frightened and snubbed the survivor into a hurt and passive silence upon the subject nearest to both their hearts, than the increased irritability of his temper and the misery of his look tells his two *souffre-douleurs* that he has repented of that delay in carrying out his passionately desired project, for which he has to thank himself.

“One more such evening, and I shall think that there is a good deal to be said in praise of

parricide !” says Rupert, in groaning relief after the strain of an evening of more than ordinary gibing insult on the one side, and hardly maintained self-restraint on the other. “Of course I know what it means. Poor old chap! He would give the world to climb down ; and he would die sooner than do it !”

The young man’s face is pale, and the tears of intolerably wounded feeling glisten in his eyes.

Lavinia listens in parted-lipped compassion, as so often before, for both the sinner and the sinned against.

“I will be his ladder,” she says, in a key of quiet resolve, and so leaves the room.

Half an hour later she returns. Her large eyelids are reddened, and her mouth twitching, but she is determinedly composed.

“It is all right,” she says cheerfully. “We are to be married on May the 28th ; and he cried and begged our pardon.”

Thus it comes to pass that on this 23rd of April Lavinia is pacing in almost imminent bridehood—for what are five short weeks?—beside her future husband along a rustic road. They are taking a sweethearts’ ramble, like any other lad and lass. About them the charming garden of England swells and dips in gentle hills and long valleys and seaward-stretching plain. They have mounted the rise behind their house, and looked from the ploughland at the top towards the distant Sussex range. The cherry orchards still hold back their snowy secret, but the plum-blossom is whitening the brown

trees ; and he would be over-greedy for colour whom the dazzling grass and the generous larches and the sketchily greening thicket did not satisfy.

Their path, leading down from the hill-crest, has brought them to an old-world farm, where with its team of four strong horses, that to a London eye, used to overloading and strain, would look so pleasantly up to their work, a waggon stands by a stack, from whose top men are pitching straw into it. On the grass in front of the house sheep crop and stare with their stupid wide-apart eyes, and hen-coops stand—lambs and chickens in friendliest relation. A lamb has two little yellow balls of fluff perched confidently, one on its woolly back, one on its forehead.

Lavinia has seen it all a thousand times before ; but to-day a new sense of turtle-winged content and thankful acquiescence in her destiny seems settling down upon her heart. The feeling translates itself into words.

“It is very nice to have you back.”

“It is very nice to be back,” replies her companion, with less than his usual point.

Rupert has been in London, and returned only last night. His visits to the metropolis have to be conducted with caution and veiled in mystery, despite the innocence of his objects, owing to the profound contempt felt and—it need scarcely be added—expressed by his father for his tastes and occupation. Rupert has half a dozen graceful talents, which, if the roof of the house is not to be blown off, must be hidden under a pile of bushels. Sir

George must be kept in ignorance that his last surviving son stoops to singing in a Madrigal Society, draws clever caricatures of Tory statesmen for a weekly, and writes brilliant little leaders for a new Liberal daily paper.

When he has been away Lavinia has always missed her cousin. This last time has seemed more irksome than any previous one ; partly because more has happened than is usually the case in the week of his absence ; partly, as she tells herself with heartfelt congratulation, because she must have grown much fonder of him. There can be no question now as to its being "to please herself" that she is marrying Rupert, since she plainly cannot do without him.

They have left the farm behind them, and, dipping down into a valley-let, are passing through a hop-garden, where the eye travels through the long vista of bare poles to little blue air-pictures at the end. From a chestnut-brake near by, a nightingale, mimicked by a throstle, is whit-whitting and glug-glugging. They pause to listen.

"I wish it was over," says Lavinia, presently, continuing a theme which Philomel had interrupted. "I dread it unaccountably ; no, not unaccountably ! I suppose 'twould be odd if I did not ?"

"I can't help grudging him to Féodorovna !" answers Rupert, rather sadly. "We have so much more right to him."

"But we could not have made him a quarter as comfortable," rejoins Lavinia. "You know how elaborate her arrangements were ; and since Mr. Prince put his foot down about allowing her to have

only two at a time, Captain Binning has had the benefit of almost all her attentions."

"A doubtful good that!"

"She does not think much of the other one!" pursues Lavinia, half-laughing. "He has had a bit of his nose and half his upper lip shot away, poor fellow! but, unfortunately, it was not in action, but while he was sitting at luncheon on the veldt."

"And Binning! Was my father much upset by the interview?"

Lavinia sighs. "At first I thought he was going to have one of those dreadful *dry* agonies such as he used to have at first; but, thank God, that passed off, and then he could talk a little—tell me a little about him." With an afterthought, "He was quite nice in what he said."

"You mean that he did not institute any comparisons!" says the young man, reading between the lines, and with that unfortunate plate-glass view into his companion's thoughts which she often inwardly deplores.

"None. I had much rather have put off *my* visit a little later," continues Miss Carew—they are strolling on again—"until the poor man had recovered his strength a little. His wound is not half healed yet, and he was much exhausted by his journey; but Féodorovna insists on my going to-day; she says that he has expressed a great wish to see me, and that, as far as her power to gratify him goes, he shall not be balked in his slightest whim."

Rupert lifts his eyebrows. "Already, my Féo?"

he says, in sarcastic apostrophe of the absent fair one.

Lavinia has indulged herself in a light mimicry of Miss Prince's tones, which always amuses them both ; and they walk on mutually pleased.

"I shall just have time to run into the Rectory before I go !" says Lavinia, an hour later, when their pleasantly sauntering steps have brought them home again.

A very slight cloud passes over the young man's face.

"I have never yet known an action of yours which was not prefaced by that run," he says. "If you were to be told that the last trump was to sound in ten minutes, you would answer, 'I shall just have time to run into the Rectory first.'"

"Perhaps I should !" answers she, aggravatingly, walking off and kissing her hand.

It is in compliance with an offer from the younger Darcys to exhibit the newly hatched turkeys, that Lavinia is running counter to her lover's prejudice. She finds them on the banks of the "Tugela River," a somewhat duck-muddied ditch which runs under the hedge by the henhouse, and is at once led to the pen where Daphne is feeding the turkey-chicks with a mess in which chopped onion—of which, in its bulb state, she mostly carries a specimen in her pocket as a precautionary measure—predominates.

"Clergyman has brought out three more than he did last year," says the child, triumphantly, looking up from the pipkin in her lap.

"Clergyman !" repeats Miss Carew, with a

cavilling glance at the large and motherly Brahma hen under the coop. "I thought all your hens were soldiers."

"So they are," answers Phillida, matter-of-factly. "Clergyman is an Army chaplain."

"Do you perceive that Daphne has become a walking onion?" asks Mrs. Darcy, joining the party, and holding her pocket-handkerchief to her nose. "The smell goes all through the house! It wakes us at night."

She says it with humorous resignation, and they both laugh. The situation between the friends is no longer strained. Susan is *almost* quite silent; and Lavinia is *almost* quite confident on the subject upon which they know that they differ so widely. Like a generous opponent, Mrs. Darcy has thrown herself heart and soul into the clothes—not many—and the rearrangements of the house—not many either—which the approaching wedding entails.

"There never could be a marriage which made so little change in anybody's life."

Lavinia has said, in a tone of self-congratulation, "The thing that hath been shall be!" and Susan has answered inoffensively in appearance, "Yes?"

But the "Yes" is interrogative, and its monosyllable brings to the girl the flashed realization that what she has said is absolutely false; that though she will *live* within the same walls, take the same walks, look on the same windmills and oast-houses, yet the change to herself will be enormous, irrevocable, unescapable. But that it will be wholly for

the better, she has so nearly convinced herself, that it is with a very stout look and high courage, that she now says—

“Rupert came back last night. I was so thankful. We had so much to talk about.”

“You have been telling him of the event of the neighbourhood, I suppose?” answers Mrs. Darcy; her eye fixed rather intentionally upon her two elder daughters, who between them are lugging a large turkey-hen, who is not intended to sit, from a primrosy nest improvised in the Tugela bank—“the opening of Féodorovna Prince’s hospital?”

“I am on my way to visit one of the patients,” replies Lavinia. “That reminds me I must be off! I wish it was over! I wonder why I dread it so much?”

“It is never pleasant to have one’s old cuts torn open,” answers Mrs. Darcy.

The explanation is rational, even to obviousness; but it is not satisfactory. Painful and tear-producing as the scene between herself and the man who was the innocent cause of poor Bill’s death must naturally be, the feeling that had existed between herself and her cousin, though warm and true, had not been of a nature to account for the state of trepidating dread with which she approaches the interview. And yet is it all dread? Is not there, too, a strong element of excited anticipation, that has no kinship with pain? Is it the spring, that incorrigible merry-maker, that is answerable for her elation? Is it the determined budding of everything about her, that makes her feel as if she were budding too? Is it

because Rupert has returned? For a quarter of a mile she tries to persuade herself that this is the reason; but the negative that is given in her *for intérieur* is so emphatic and persistent that she has to accept it.

Passing the edge of the King's Wood, she steps aside to pick one or two of the myriad wood anemones that, vanquishing the piled dead leaves more successfully than the primroses, floor it with their pensive poetic heads and graceful green collars. Rupert is always pleased when she presents him with a posy. They would be fresher if she waited to gather them on her way back; but some obscure instinct, which she does not in the least recognize, hints darkly to her that on her way back she will perhaps not remember to pay the little attention. As she looks at the drooped heads blushing pinkily in her hand, she tries idly to picture what her impression of Rupert would be were it he whom she were about to see for the first time. She tries to picture *his* head lying in patient pain upon a pillow—yes; so far imagination obeys easily: Rupert would be patient enough; he has had a good apprenticeship, poor fellow!—his cheeks hollowed with suffering—yes; fancy runs along docilely enough still: they are not too plump already; no one can accuse Rupert of superfluous flesh—his chest swathed in bandages, where the Mauser bullet took its clean course through his body, so closely shaving his heart. No!

She has gone too far! Imagination strikes work; confessing its utter inability to represent her future

husband as prostrated by a wound received in battle ! She walks on, quickening her pace, and vaguely irritated with herself. It was a senseless and mischievous exercise of fancy, and she had no business to indulge in it.

CHAPTER VIII

THE spring—or is it the spring?—has been playing its genial game with Mrs. Prince, too, as is evident by the restored importance of her gait, as she sweeps out of the orchid-house, whither Lavinia has pursued her, and by the smoothed and satisfied visage—changed, indeed, from that which she had worn two months ago in announcing her daughter's mysterious correspondence with the Cavalry Officer Commanding at Canterbury—which she turns towards her visitor.

“Did you walk,” she asks, “this warm day? Sir George wanted the horses, I suppose? It must be awkward having only one pair. If I had known, I should have been so delighted to send for you!”

There is sincere welcome in words and voice, coupled with that touch of patronage which—as employed towards a member of the oldest and somehow most important family of the countryside, Mrs. Prince and Lavinia have—before the former's parental woes had made both forget it—found respectively so agreeable and so galling.

“Thanks, but I like walking.”

“Féo will be here in a minute. I told them to let her know the moment you arrived. She is

with her patients ! She is never anywhere else now ! Thrown up all her engagements ; devotes herself wholly to them."

It is clear that, in pre-Candle days, Mrs. Prince had said "'olly ;" but the victory over the early infirmity is so complete as to be marked only by an intensity of aspirate unknown to those whose *h*'s have grown up with them.

"It is certainly the most unobjectionable craze she has ever had !" replies Lavinia, whose withers are still slightly wrung by the allusion to her horselessness ; and who is reflecting how much less underbred a thing adversity is than prosperity.

"When I say 'patients,' " pursues Mrs. Prince, not in the least offended by, in fact, not hearing, Miss Carew's observation, "I ought to put it in the singular ; for I must own she does not take much notice of poor Smethurst"—pausing to laugh ; then, proceeding in a tone of wondering admiration, "Isn't it astonishing what they do in the way of surgery now ? Nurse Blandy tells me that they are going—the doctors, I mean—to make him a new end to his nose, and turn his lip inside out, and I don't know what all !"

"Poor creature ! How terrible !"—shuddering.

"As for the other one, Binning, there is nothing good enough for him ! At first she was all for nursing him entirely herself, not letting Nurse Blandy, no, nor Nurse Rice either, go near him ; but there her father put his foot down !—you know Mr. Prince *does* put his foot down now and then—and he said to her, 'No, Féo, my child, you may

turn my house into a shambles'—we thought then there would have to be an operation—'and a drug store, but I will not have my daughter lay herself open to a prosecution for manslaughter; and that is what it would come to—for as sure as ever you nurse him, he'll die!'"

Lavinia had not felt inclined to laugh before, but she now smiles broadly in pleased approval.

"She was mad at first," continues the narrator; "but she had to give in; and I really do not see that she has much to complain of, for she is with him all day, and half the night!"

Lavinia hopes that the slight shudder with which she hears this statement—a shudder born of a compassion sharper and deeper than poor Mr. Smethurst's ingloriously shattered features had called forth—is not visible to the eye of Miss Prince's mother.

"Of course, at first," pursues the latter, "the great attraction was that he had been in General ——'s Brigade—that dreadful business!"—with a distressful crease of reminiscence on her placid brow. "It seems like a horrible nightmare now! Yet, for the last day or two, I can't help thinking it is for himself that she is so taken up with him." After a moment's reflection, "Well, after all, we know that he must be a fine fellow, by what he has done; and though all his people are in India, I fancy he is highly connected."

The trend of the mother's thoughts towards future developments is apparent. But Lavinia is spared the effort to hide how dearly, in her

opinion, the wounded officer would buy his cure under the contingency glanced at, by the appearance of Féodorovna herself—Féodorovna, beautified, vivified, animated almost past recognition. It is not only that Miss Prince wears the most becoming of created garbs, whose bewitchingness many a mother of succumbing sons has cursed—the dress of a nurse ; but her very features seem to have lost some of their poverty and paltriness ; and gained in meaning and interest.

“Will you come at once, please ? Mother, you have no right to delay Lavinia,” she says, scarcely sparing time for the curtest greeting. “He expects you, and a sick man should never be kept waiting.”

There is the authority and importance if a certificated official in voice and manner, and Lavinia would be sarcastically amused, if once again and more strongly than before, that trepidating dread of the coming interview had not laid hold of her.

“I am ready,” she answers quietly. “I was only waiting for you.” She is fighting tooth and nail with her agitation ; telling herself what a Bedlamite thing it is, all the way across the tessellated marble of the pretentious sitting-hall, up the flights of the profoundly carpeted stairs, through the hot-water-warmed passages ; and in outward appearance it is conquered by the time they reach and pause at a closed door.

“You must understand that he is not to be agitated in any way ; that you must not approach any painful subject,” says Féodorovna, in an exasperating whisper of command.

“Wouldn’t it be better to put it off ?” asks Miss

Carew, in jarred recoiling from the just-opening portal ; but her companion frowns her down.

The bed is in a recess of the room, and the window-blind, partly drawn down in defence against the westering blaze, confuses Miss Carew's sight ; besides which her feet have halted near the threshold to allow time for her own introduction, so that she hears the voice before she sees the face of the wounded man.

"Miss Carew has come to see you !" Féodorovna explains, in a tiresome *carneying* voice, leaning over the pillows. "But you must send her away the moment you are tired of her ; and you must not let her talk to you about anything that is not quite pleasant and cheerful."

Thus agreeably heralded by an implication of her own morose garrulity, Lavinia approaches the invalid, hearing his answer, "I am exceedingly grateful to her," before she sees his face.

Often and often, in after-days, the fact that his first words concerning her were an expression of gratitude recurs to her with a sense of the keenest irony.

"Do you wish to be *tête-à-tête* ?" asks Féodorovna, when the whole and the sick have silently touched each other's hands ; "or had you rather I would stay ?" and the answer, courteous in its subtlety—

"I am sure that you ought to rest ; I am ashamed to think of how much you have been doing for me to-day," is divined by Lavinia to be not what the asker had expected.

However, without flagrant breach of her own axiom, that a sick man is not to be thwarted, she cannot avoid compliance, and with an officious parting question, "Where shall she sit? Would you like her to be beside you, or where you can see her better?" and a final fussing over phials and drinks, takes her cap, her apron, and her cuffs away.

A sense of relief at her departure, coupled with a strong, shy impulse to follow her, and that again with a far stronger one to snatch another look at the just-glanced-at face of him for whom Bill had died, join to silence Lavinia for the first moment or two. That the wish to be acquainted with each other's features must be reciprocal, is proved by the sick man's first words—

"Would you mind sitting in that chair?"

Her eyes first seek, then follow the direction of his, to see which chair he means; and by the time she sits down obediently in it, they both know—will know to the end of their lives—what each looks like.

He has been a strong man, will be a strong man again, thank God!

Why should she thank God for it? She flashes herself the inward question, with an already catching breath. Large-framed, and as he lies on his back in bed he looks prodigiously long, far longer than he really is; and, thanks to the falling-in of his cheeks, his eyes, which in their normal state must be of no greater size than they ought to be—and saucer-eyes are no beauty in a man—oppress her with the large intentness of their gaze. In their

depths she seems to read an acquaintance with death that has yet not flinched from him ; but she knows that it is not death which is looking out at her from them.

“Thank you for coming.”

“I liked to come.” She is sitting perfectly quiet ; instinct and experience combining to tell her how many sick-beds have cursed the rustling gown, the meddling fingers, and the lugubriously watching eye. Her repose seems to enter like balm into his soul.

“You have been used to nursing ?” he asks, though it sounds more like an assertion than a question.

“Sometimes, when they have been ill, I have nursed”—“my men,” she is going to say ; but checks herself : to a perfect stranger she must not employ her silly home-phrases—“I have nursed my uncle several times, and Rupert twice, and—Bill once.” Her voice drops at framing the name which forms the one sad link between them ; and she has time to reproach herself for having had the maladroitness and bad taste to introduce it before Binning speaks again.

“Thank you for mentioning him to me,” he says, physical weakness making him less master of his emotion than she divines that he would normally be. “I was afraid that you would not be able to bear it.”

A panic of remorse at having done exactly what his improvised nurse had forbidden her to do, and at once introduced a painful and agitating theme, chokes for an imperceptible moment Lavinia’s answer. It

is only the reflection that, as a golden rule, whatever Féodorovna says or bids is sure to have common sense and right as its exact opposite, calms her, and gives her the power of steady and reassuring response.

"We always talk of him."

"But to *me*?" he says, struggling in his agitation into what her nurse-instinct tells her to be a forbidden effort to sit up.

At once her noiseless gown and her noble still figure are beside him.

"You must not get excited!" she says, laying a capable cool hand on his gaunt shoulder; and at once he lies back, with a sudden sense of intense well-being.

"I felt that you must all hate me," he says in almost a whisper; and she answers slow and stilly—

"I do not think we do."

At that he lies content a while, drinking her in with the privileged directness of the sick. What hair! What a beautiful, generous, rather large mouth! What a divine sorrowful pity! What would have become of him, if the likely, the almost certain, had happened, and she *had* hated him?

And Lavinia! He is the first to meet her eyes of the costly wreckage with which the South African storm has strewn the shores of the motherland; he is the comrade for whose life dear brave Bill thought it a small thing to lay down his own; and as she knows that the deed which has stretched him in suffering and weakness before her was as madly gallant as the one by whose means he lived to do it, is it any wonder that she stands in a tranced silence, drinking him in, as he is drinking her?

"I felt it very strongly when his father came to see me," says Binning, presently, still scarcely above his breath, and harking back to the fears he had expressed of being abhorred by his dead friend's family.

"It did him good to talk to you!" After a second or two, "He did not grudge Bill—we none of us did; and it is the very death that Bill himself would have chosen."

"Yes; I know it is."

There is, or she thinks it, a kind of envy in the acquiescent voice.

"And we all felt that you would have changed places with him if you could, wouldn't you?"

The surface motive of the speech is the kind and Christian one of bringing comfort to a spirit that she divines to be as sorely wounded as the brave body that holds it; but underneath there lurks another, scarcely known even to herself. It is the question she had put to Rupert two months ago—to Rupert, the unblushing candour of whose answering negative had given her one of those accesses of repulsion towards him, which for the future it will be a crime for her to indulge. A feverish and senseless curiosity prompts her to repeat it now.

"Yes, I would."

There is no asseveration to strengthen the assent; yet it carries a conviction as deep—nay, much deeper, for she had tried not to believe the latter—than Rupert's confession that he would much rather not have died for his brother. Retribution speedily overtakes her, in the sting of sudden pain caused by the contrast she herself has brought out, into salience;

and conscious of the unworthiness of her double motive, she finds herself unable to bear the gratitude of his eyes. They are hazel, and have eagleish yellow lights in them, as one part of herself tells another part some time after she has left him.

"It was such a strange coincidence that I should be sent here!" he says presently, moving his languid head so that he may get a better view of her, for she has sat down again, a little way off; "that *I*, of all people, should be the first result of Miss Prince's request to General —— at Canterbury to have some of us to nurse. When I realized what neighbourhood it was that I was to be brought to—when I heard that you were near neighbours, I had almost given it up at the last moment!"

"We should have been sorry for that."

There is a measured reassuring kindness in her words; but he feels suddenly chilled. It must strike her own ears as too measured; for she adds—

"We should have liked to have had you ourselves; my uncle has said so repeatedly; but we have no appliances! We could not have made you nearly so comfortable as you are here!"

His eyes, large with leanness, roll round the spacious airiness of the apartment.

"I am in the lap of luxury!" he says; but though there is gratitude in his tone, enthusiasm is absent.

After that they are silent for a little space. He must be talking too much. She has been enjoined not to tire him, and *if she sends up his temperature, she will not be allowed to come again!* The

first two are confessed apprehensions walking boldly up the front stairs of her mind. The third, on shoeless feet, is creeping up the back ! To him, it appears that her last retirement to her chair has left her more distant than at first, and he marvels at the subtlety of his own ruse to bring her back to the bedside.

"Would you mind telling me the name of the flowers you are wearing ?"

"Wood anemones."

"Do they smell good ?"

"I do not think they have any scent." There is a moment's struggle between the maiden and the nurse in her ; and then the nurse prevails. "Would you like to try ?" she asks, with her first smile—first epoch-making curving into dimples of her grave mouth.

She is beside him once again, and gives the blossoms into his fever-wasted hand. He holds them gratefully to his nostrils ; and it is, of course, by accident that they touch his lips too.

"Not smell ! Why, they have the whole blessed spring crammed into them !"

Again she smiles—her slow, rich smile—not claiming her posy—Rupert's posy—back ; but just standing by him, enjoying his enjoyment. Not, however, for long. The door opens with a fidgetingly careful turning of the handle, and a needlessly cautious foot crosses the carpet. Féodorovna, a bovril-bearing tray in her hand, stands between them.

"You are quite worn out !" she says, in a

voice of mixed condolence and counsel. "Miss Carew shall not stay a moment longer! She shall go at once!"

The tone implies that Lavinia has shamelessly outstayed her welcome, and her cheek burns for a moment, then resumes its cool pink. Féodorovna means no offence. It is only her way of showing what an adept she is in her new profession. The speech's effect upon the patient is a much stronger one.

"Oh no! Why should she?" he exclaims energetically, with another of those forbidden struggles of his to sit up.

In authoritatively compelling him into recumbence again, Miss Prince's cap-strings somehow get into her victim's eyes. Lavinia's last sight of him is lying back exhausted by the remedies applied, much more than by his own imprudent movement; smiling faintly, with a patience much superior even to that which he had exhibited while lying wounded at the donga-bottom, through the endless hours of the winter night; *smiling*, while Féodorovna, taking it for granted that he feels faint, fans him with a vigour that makes the end of his pinched nose and his tired eyelids tremble.

CHAPTER IX

FÉODOROVNA has ejected her so early that she need not go home at once. This is Lavinia's first thought on getting outside the house. It is but rarely that Miss Carew is not wanted in her own little *milieu*; but to-day she would be superfluous. Her uncle and Rupert are busy with the lawyer, who has come down from London—busy over settlements: a settlement upon herself; provision for the younger children—her younger children, hers and Rupert's! If she walk very fast, perhaps she may outwalk this last thought. But it is a good walker; it keeps up with her. Possibly she might lose it in the wood. The idea results in a *détour*, which will involve passing through a portion of it. The word "wood" is perhaps a misnomer, for the grown trees are few and sparse; and yet by what other name can you describe these silvan miles of young chestnut, oak, and birch growths, that every ten years fall beneath the hatchet, to continually renew their tireless upspringing? Where only recently amputated stumps remain, the flowers grow far the lushest.

She pauses on reaching a spot where a quarter-acre of ground is utterly given over to the innocent loveliness of the cuckoo-flower, dog-violet,

primrose, "firstborn child of Ver," and purpling wood anemone. She stands looking down at them, as if she had never seen them before; as if these lowly, lifelong friends were the new-seen blossoms of a nobler planet. What has happened to her senses, that she sees and hears and smells with such three-fold keenness? Why does she feel so startlingly alive? The wonder drives Rupert's younger children successfully into the background of her mind. Yet this bounding new consciousness of the splendour of life—life actual, this bursting irrepressible life of the field and the woodland—and life possible—cannot answer, when the roll-call of emotions is called, to the name of pleasure.

Life possible!—it is a hooded anonymous thing, that she dare not interrogate. In its presence her thoughts draw in their antennæ, like a sea-creature's suddenly touched. She starts away from the little woodland garden, and walks hurriedly on, down a rough cart-track, rutty and caked with the winter's dried mud. Foolish extravagant analogies and comparisons dart through her brain—not only dart, but tarry and pitch tents there. Her life has been like this parched wintry road—a dull track for heavy-wheeled days to grind and plough along; now it has turned suddenly into a blossoming brake. Her eyes lift themselves in a frightened rapture to where the descending sun's beams thread with evening light the lovely thin green of the birches, exquisitely breaking and shaming the tardier chestnuts.

"It is the spring!" she says to herself. "It has always made me feel drunk!"

But the long vista of branches, all brownly, redly, greenly bursting, with opulent variety of ideas, ahead of her, tells her that she lies.

* * * * *

Sir George is on the look out for her when she reaches home, and the sight of his familiar figure, coupled with a remorseful fear of having been wanted and not been within reach—an almost unparalleled occurrence in her history—pulls her down to fact and earth again, without a moment's delay. Yet a single glance at her uncle's face tells her that, despite her truancy, she finds him in the best possible of humours.

"And where have you been gadding, miss?" he asks, in a tone that reveals the highest complacency of which one so habitually gloomy is capable.

"I thought you were busy with Mr. Ingram," she answers, involuntarily shirking the question.

"And so we have been," returns he, his sombre face breaking into a smile; "both Rupert and I! And very glad you ought to be that we have."

"Ought I?"

"I was determined that you should have no excuse for wishing to hurry me off," continues Sir George, with rather acrid pleasantry, that has yet every intention of being agreeable. "After all, what do I want?—a crust and a glass of Marsala, an arm-chair and a pipe. So I have made over the whole of his mother's money to Rupert, and he has settled every penny of it on you and your children."

For a moment or two Lavinia is quite silent. Possibly surprise at her uncle's flight of imagination

in the matter of the exiguity of his own needs ; possibly also choking gratitude ; and possibly, again, the sudden confrontation with the younger children, whom she had thought to have buried in the wood, keep her dumb.

“ You are very good to me,” she answers at last, in a tone which sounds to herself the *ne plus ultra* of thankless flatness ; but in which her hearer happily recognizes only an acknowledgment, faltering from the excess of its obligation.

“ Whom else have we got to be good to but our little Mosquito ? ” he asks, using the perfectly inappropriate pet-name which has always indicated the high-water mark of his favour. “ And now that we have her safe for life—I have sometimes had my misgivings as to our doing that—we must do what we can for her ; yes, we must do what we can for her ! ”

There is always something oppressive in the lightness of the habitually heavy, in the jollity of the habitually morose ; and Sir George’s elation sits like lead upon his niece’s heart. She reproaches herself bitterly for it. Has not her whole life’s aim been to make him happy ? And now that by his manner he is showing a cheerfulness higher than he had ever enjoyed even before the news of Bill’s death reached him, by what odious perversity are her own spirits dropping down to zero ? Her one consolation is that he departs complacently, without the dimmest suspicion of her mental attitude. With Rupert—Rupert, who knows her like the palm of his own hand—her task will be incalculably harder.

It has to be undertaken almost immediately ; for her betrothed at once takes his father's place.

"Has he told you?" asks the young man, coming up to her, as she stands slowly pulling off her gloves by the needless drawing-room fire. "Isn't it splendid of him? He would have stripped himself even more entirely if I had let him—to the bone, in fact."

The speaker's eyes, sometimes gently cynical, are alive and shining with recent emotion, gratitude, and pleasure. In them she also reads the desire for an embrace. Why she does not meet it with the not particularly reluctant acquiescence that is usual to her, she could not tell you, if you had asked her. With tactful self-denial, Rupert at once resigns his pretensions to a congratulatory kiss.

"He called me 'my boy' over and over again!" he says, with a gratification none the less intense for being quiet. "You know that I always feel as if I could die a hundred deaths for him, when he calls me 'my boy.'"

"You are a 'Boy' and I am a 'Mosquito'!" replies she, with what she feels to be a hateful dry laugh. Hitherto one of the qualities she has most admired in her cousin has been the gentle forgiveness and self-restraint which has characterized his attitude towards his father—the filial piety, which has survived so many buffets. Now she tells herself that the sentiment which makes his voice quiver is hysterical, and that a man's tears should not be so near his eyes. No one but Rupert, however—and she trusts that not even he—would read these

harsh comments between the lines of the hastily candid "Yes, I know you would," with which she supplements her first utterance.

Does his changing the subject mean that he comprehends? Impossible! Yet he does change it.

"Rather an unlucky thing has happened," he says, in a voice that has altered, like his theme. "You have heard me mention Dubary Jones?"

For a moment she looks perfectly vague, then, "Of course I have! He introduced you to the editor of the *Flail*; and he writes poetry himself?"

It is the measure of how far her thoughts have strayed from Rupert and his group of æsthetics, that she should be so painstakingly detailed in proving that they have come back.

"His translations of Verlaine were very remarkable, if you remember," replies Rupert, kindly jogging her memory. It needs the assistance given, presenting for the time a perfect blank as to what the bard in question's bid for immortality consists of. "I have had a wire from him, asking me to put him up for the night. He is staying with the Tanquerays. He has been of great use to me in various ways, and I did not quite like to refuse him."

Between each sentence the young man makes a slight pause, as if to give room for an expression of approval or acquiescence, but it is not before the full stop at the end that Lavinia is ready.

"Of course you accepted him? You were perfectly right. What else could you do?"

"It is a nuisance that it should have happened at this moment. My father will not be able to

endure him ; as I have often told you about him—he is *like me, only more so !*” Rupert smiles rather humorously, relieved at her acceptance of his news.

She gives a smile too ; but there is a shudder under it—a shudder which recurs more than once during the dinner and evening that follow, when, faithful to her lifelong profession of buffer, she draws the conversation of Mr. Dubary Jones upon herself, to avert the catastrophe that must ensue if it is directed to Sir George. In a party of four it is no easy task to prevent the talk becoming general ; but ably seconded by Rupert, and by the exercise of ceaseless vigilance, attention, and civility, Miss Carew succeeds in securing the couple of *tête-à-têtes*, by which only a thunderbolt can be warded off. But while kindly and graciously smiling, listening, and asking, Rupert’s descriptive phrase, “*like me, only more so,*” drips like melted lead upon her heart. Does she indeed see before her what Rupert will come to in the ten years by which his friend is richer than he ? Is this his logical conclusion ?—this little decadent, who is trying to fit his conversation to a hostess whom he suspects of being sporting ?

“How delightful hunting must be !”

She assents, “Very.”

“And shooting ! That must be so exciting !”

Again she acquiesces with creditable gravity, adding that salmon-fishing is considered by many people to be the most engrossing of sports.

For a moment he looks nonplussed, and at a loss for a suitable rejoinder ; but quickly recovering himself, says brightly—

"Oh yes, it must be great fun, skipping from rock to rock."

This evidence of how clearly he has grasped the nature of the amusement alluded to, finishes her for a while ; but she presently recovers, as he has done, and for the rest of dinner they continue under the almost insuperable difficulties indicated, the class of conversation which he supposes suited to her capacity and tastes ; nor does she care to undeceive him.

After all, contemptible and uncongenial as he is, and hideous as is the thought that the rudiments of him lie in Rupert, Lavinia has reason to be grateful to the translator of Verlaine. But for him she would have had to undergo a close interrogatory as to her visit of the afternoon. She catches herself up in mid-congratulation. Why should it be to undergo ? Why should she mind retailing the little incidents which must be of equal interest to all three of them ? What that is not good and touching is there to tell—whether it be the man's affecting fear lest he should be unendurable in all their eyes, or the heroic patience with which he bears the cruel kindness of Féodorovna's terrible ministrations ? Yet she cannot help a feeling of discreditable relief that the tale which must be told is by the stranger's presence deferred till next morning.

And next morning, sure enough, the demand for it comes. An early train removes Mr. Dubary Jones, and Sir George having dismissed him with the comparatively Christian observation that he wonders what Rupert can see in such a despicable little worm,

and having added the still more Christian rider that he supposes all tastes are respectable, gladly changes the subject for the dreaded one—now better prepared for than it was last evening.

“So you saw Binning! Come into the study, and tell me all about him.”

She tells him all, repeats almost word for word the little talk—*how* little!—that had passed between them, keeping back for herself only the one tiny episode of the wood anemones. Sir George is perfectly indifferent to flowers, and could not enter into a sick man’s craving for their grace and perfume. Talk with her uncle has throughout her life meant judicious suppressions; yet this one small kept-back piece of the price of her land makes her feel like Ananias.

“He said much the same sort of thing to me,” is her hearer’s half-disappointed comment. “No doubt he will repeat it to Rupert to-day.”

“Is Rupert going to see him to-day?”

“I have made a point of it. I confess I rather wonder that the proposal did not emanate from himself! If the poor fellow has this idea in his head, that we shrink from him, we must do all we can to drive it out.”

Lavinia nods slightly. Difficulties loom vaguely ahead of her, born of this utterance, yet her heart feels suddenly light. Can it be because a vista of possible repetitions of yesterday open before her?

“And though I may not rate our society very highly,” pursues Sir George, with one of his scarce

smiles, "I think it may, perhaps, compare not unfavourably with Féo's."

Lavinia turns to go, thinking her task ended, and relieved that it is over. But another awaits her.

"Stop!" says Sir George. "Why are you in such a hurry to run away? I have not half done with you yet." There is great kindness, and the unwonted pleasure of being conscious that he is about to give pleasure in his voice, and in the gesture with which he draws towards him and opens one after another half a dozen obviously not new jewel-cases. "They have not seen the light for nearly twenty years," he says, passing his hand with a movement that is almost a caress over the faded velvet of one of them. "I suppose the settings are old-fashioned, but I believe the stones are good; I know that the pearls are. Garrard took five years collecting them one by one! The—the person who last wore them was very proud of them."

It is the nearest approach Sir George has ever made towards mentioning his departed wife to Lavinia, and she listens in reverent silence.

He has taken the string of pearls from its long-occupied bed, and, holding it between his fingers, eyes it pensively. Then, stretching hand and necklace out to her, he says, in a voice of command, whose harshness is the cover for an emotion that it angers him should have escaped from its two decades of prison in his heart—

"Put it on! Wear it always!"

She obeys; but her fingers, usually quick and clever, fumble over the diamond clasp.

"I would not give it you till I was quite sure we had really got hold of you!" continues Sir George, regarding with evident satisfaction the jewels—a little discoloured and damaged by their long incarceration, but still beautiful, as they circle his niece's throat. "Until lately I have had my doubts, but I have been watching. I often notice things, more than you think"—with a shrewd look—"I saw how out of spirits you were in Rupert's absence, and how you brightened up when he returned, and I said to myself, 'It is all right.' So don't say anything more"—almost pushing her to the door, in obvious dread and yet expectation of the tide of her thanks that must wash over him—"but take them with you, and be off!"

"Am I to say *nothing*?" she stammers.

"Nothing! Actions speak louder than words! Marry Rupert, and give me a grandson as quick as you can!"

CHAPTER X

“Les joies ne sont que les afflictions en robe de fête.”

THE kitchen-garden spreads itself out to the sun like a dog stretched basking before the fire. Upward it slopes ; its ripe red walls, its espaliers, and wine-coloured and yellow spring flowers running up the hill ; house and stables, church tower, and promise-making trees, at its foot, and with an apple-orchard, and a smaller cherry one, as a crown for its head. The apple-orchard represents, as yet, only promise too ; but the hurrying cherry blossom spells performance.

Lavinia, standing on the sunny mid-path, with a bundle of bass-matting, with which she has been training a young hop round a pole, lying on the ground beside her, has just raised herself from her knees to admire the rich red look that makes the cherry trees blush. She knows it to be due to the young leaves which to-morrow will have disappeared in the storm of white. They will be bridal to-morrow. *Bridal !* She repeats the word over to herself. This is the 28th of April. On precisely this day month, she will be bridal too. The thought, apparently, is not one that invites dwelling upon, for she turns back to her bass-matting and her hop ;

and, in so doing, becomes aware of a figure—that of Mrs. Darcy—climbing the gravel walk towards her.

Mrs. Darcy's visits to Lavinia are much rarer than Lavinia's to Mrs. Darcy ; partly because she is a good deal busier, and partly because she does not like Rupert. The first reason is naturally the only one allowed to appear in the relations between the friends.

"To what am I indebted for the honour of this visit ?" asks the girl, with playful formality.

Her friend's answer is not quite so ready as usual ; yet her wiry slimness cannot be breathed by so gentle a hill.

"Miss Brine has come back. She has killed one relation, and cured another !"

"How do the children bear it ?"

"They are inconsolable ! The thought of having to be comparatively clean for an indefinite time has almost broken them down !"

Both laugh.

"It is an ill wind that blows nobody good ; so you are able to come and change the weather with me ?"

There is a little surprise and inquiry in the key used ; but Mrs. Darcy accepts it as a statement apparently, for she stands, taking in, with eyes and ears and nostrils, the universal blossoming and courting in earth and air.

"Don't you wish we could paraphrase Joshua's command, 'Sun, stand thou still upon Gibeon, and thou moon in the valley of Ajalon,' and say, 'Spring, stand thou still in April' ?"

"Do I?" answers the other, uneasily. "I do not think so!"

Her friend looks at her with covert observation, to verify that, despite the peaceful quality of the most soothing of all occupations, gardening, peace is not the dominant note in the concert of Miss Carew's emotions this gaudy, sweetly clamorous April morning.

"In point of fact, I came to bring you a message."

"From whom?"

Is it fancy that the question is jerked out with some sort of difficulty?

"From Mrs. Prince. She wants to persuade you to pay Captain Binning another visit this afternoon. She tells me"—with a faint tinge of surprise—"that you refused when she asked you two days ago."

"I was there on Monday—that is only five days ago!" Lavinia has knelt down on the gravel again, and is busy with her hop. Her voice sounds a trifle hard.

"Five days can be pretty long to a sick man, more especially to a sick man nursed by Féodorovna Prince!"

"But he is not nursed by her!" exclaims the other, almost angrily. "Mrs. Prince herself told me that Mr. Prince had forbidden it, because he knew she would kill him!"

Mrs. Darcy shakes her head. "As long as it was a question of his life, Mr. Prince interfered; now that it is merely a matter of shaking his reason

and indefinitely retarding his recovery, Féo is at liberty to work her inhuman will upon him. Only yesterday, Nurse Blandy said to me that if things were not altered, she should tell Dr. Roots that she must throw up the case."

"And do you expect me to undertake it?" asks Lavinia, in a voice so unlike her own, so unfeeling and grating, that Susan starts. "Rupert went to see him on Tuesday," continues the girl, not waiting for an answer to her rather brutal question.

"Rupert and you are not quite one yet, though you soon will be," rejoins Mrs. Darcy, drily.

"My uncle has been twice, and you went yesterday. It cannot be good for a moribund to receive such a shoal of visitors!" Her voice is still hard, and there is neither compassion nor sympathy detectable in it.

"He catches at any reprieve from Féo's importunities, poor fellow! I told him about the children and their martial ardour, and he asked me to bring them with me next time, if I was good enough to let him hope that there would be a next time—he looked at me like a lost dog, as he said it; and then Féo came in with something in a cup, and forced it down his throat, pouring half of it over the sheet. I fully expected her to hold his nose, to make him open his mouth, as Mrs. Gamp did with her patient at the Bull Inn!"

Lavinia is sitting up on her heels, the implements of her infuriated industry dropped in her lap, and listening in a silent horror that gives the lie to the callousness of her utterances of a minute ago.

Mrs. Darcy turns to go. "So I must say that you cannot spare time—that you do not see your way to it? Which sounds best?" she asks with affected carelessness.

The answer comes in the voice of Daphne, flying dishevelled, torn, and red-rosy up the walk.

"Oh, Lavy, we have had such a battle! It was between the turkey-cocks and the *hen*-cocks."

* * * * *

"I will go and see," says Féodorovna, whom, to her surprise, Lavinia finds lying on the sofa in her own luxuriously fantastic den; when, on the afternoon of the same day, a pair of hesitatingly hurrying feet carry her past the King's Wood, through the Princes' escutcheoned lodge, to and through their hall-door.

Miss Prince's voice has its *ex-cathedrà* importance, and her cap-strings their official wave and float, as she adds—

"It is quite likely that I may have to send you away. Half an hour ago, he said he felt inclined to sleep; I think it was partly a ruse to induce me to take a little rest; but he looked rather exhausted, and Nurse Blandy advised me to lie down till he wanted me again."

Between the self-satisfied lines of this communication the listener reads how eternal must be the recumbency of Féodorovna, if continued until the suggested need for her arises; and how dire the sufferings of the victim.

The interval between Miss Prince's discouraging exit and her return seems long to the feverish

candidate for an interview, which, as the moments pass, she begins hotly to feel is not desired by the person with whom it is asked. Susan has misled her—in her turn deceived by the well-meaning importunities of Mrs. Prince. To be persecuting him again after an interval of only five days ! Probably he will regard her as a second Féodorovna ! Her uncle's pet-name recurs ironically to her mind—his Mosquito ! She is going to be some one else's mosquito, too. For the first time in her life she merits the name !

“ He will see you for a few minutes ! ” announces Miss Prince, reappearing at last. “ Personally, I do not think it very prudent ; but Nurse Blandy has made up her mind that he will be none the worse for it ; and she always considers herself a Court of Final Appeal.”

There are traces of past skirmish and present ill humour in Féodorovna's appearance ; but to both Lavinia is absolutely indifferent. With an immensely relieved, but still doubting, heart—for, after all, there has been no word of his wish or will—she follows the haughtily undulating figure of her guide through the same rooms, passages, and stairs as she had traversed with a deep, but immeasurably less deep, excitement five days ago. The lowered blinds, the lavished luxury of detail, the bed in the recess,—how familiar they are ! and yet how long ago her first acquaintance with them seems !

She is nearing him. Will his first glance reveal that she has been officious ? that her visit adds one more nail to his wearisome martyrdom ? The answer comes carried by lightning. He has dragged himself

up into the forbidden attitude—at least it was forbidden five days ago; but five days is an enormous period of time—an absurdly evident joy in his caverned eyes. It cannot be more absurd than the blind elation that the recognition of that joy evokes in her. It is with relief that, when words come to her, she hears them to be temperate and rational.

“I am afraid that you were asleep, and that I woke you!”

“I never was wider awake in my life.”

His voice is stronger than it was on Monday; and Lavinia realizes that Nature has been more potent than even Féodorovna; and that he has made a perceptible step towards recovery since their last meeting.

“Are you sure that you are up to seeing me?”

“As sure as that I see you.”

Miss Prince and the nurse have retired together, but obviously at variance, towards the window, and no ear but that to which it is addressed catches the answer. For Lavinia only is the impression of the inestimable benefit conceived to be conferred by the sight of her. From one but lately lying at the point of death insincerities and conventions are apt to flee away, and she knows that straight from that heart, whose beats the bullet had so nearly stilled, rushes the response to her question.

“Come, come!” says Féodorovna, swishing up to the bedside, and speaking in that hybrid whisper with Miss Prince’s own trade-mark, warranted to en-fever the calmest invalid; “you must not hang

over him. There is nothing so fatal as to exhaust the air in the immediate neighbourhood of a patient. Sit quietly down here, and do not say too much."

The precept is easy to obey, and, in fact, compliance with an opposite one would to Miss Carew, for the first moment, be quite impossible. For those first moments the forbidden conversation is supplied by the prohibitor.

"We need not keep you, nurse," she says, with more of command and less of grovelling deference than the official in question is accustomed to hear. "Your tea is waiting for you."

Nurse Blandy's answer is to take the pillows which Féodorovna is beginning, with amateurish wrongness, to shake up, out of that ministering angel's hand, and with two masterly movements adapt them to the patient's back.

"Miss Carew will ring for me before she leaves you," she says in a restful, determined voice, and so quietly departs, with one parting glance at her foe, which explains, with telegraphic brevity and distinctness, that no attention to Miss Prince's orders, but simply a desire for her own refreshment, takes her away.

"I shall stay as watch-dog, to ensure your not being imprudent!" says Féodorovna, emerging triumphant, and with a false sense of victory, out of the late contest, and seating herself nearer to and in much better view of the sick man than she had allowed his visitor to do.

The latter has watched, with a deep, dumb indignation, the one-sided scuffle over his helpless form ;

and her eyes now meet his with as profound and acute a disappointment legible in them as she reads in his own. Féodorovna, with a truer estimate than before of the side on which the balance would swing, is to-day not going to give her prey the choice of escaping her for half an hour. Féodorovna is not going to leave them for one minute alone.

And yet, did they but know it, no speech could have so quickly driven them into intimacy, as this dumb meeting on the ground of their "most mutual" vexation. At first it seems as if silence were to reign unbroken, and when a subject is at length chosen, it is Féodorovna who starts it.

"Captain Binning has had so many visitors," she says, transgressing the most elementary rule of nursing, by discussing a patient in his own presence. "Sir George, Mrs. Darcy, Mr. Campion."

The enumeration sounds like a reproach, and the words of self-vindication, "I was asked to come," all but spring to Lavinia's lips; all but, not quite. It is better that he should think her pushing and intrusive, than that his already wearied body and spirit should have the fatigue and vexation of an explanation, whose only end would be to salve her own wounded self-esteem.

"And though he enjoys it at the time," pursues the arbiter of poor Captain Binning's destinies, "he feels the ill effects afterwards!"

"You take more trouble about me than I deserve!" says the invalid, rather faintly, and in a voice under whose admirably patient politeness Miss Carew divines an intense nervous irritation. "You

know I cannot be kept in cotton wool all my life ! ”

“ It will not be my fault if you are not ! ” returns Féo, in a tone of enthusiasm as intense and overt as that with which she had formerly proclaimed her life-dedication to General ——.

There is a silence, each of the hearers probably feeling that it would be impossible to “ go one better ” than the last utterance. Lavinia steals a shocked glance at the object of it ; but the air of civil tired endurance, untempered by either fear or surprise, with which he receives it, shows her that it is merely one of many such declarations. He only throws his head a little further back, and shuts his eyes—to reopen them, however, hastily. Lavinia follows the track of his thought. If he shows any sign of weakness, their common overseer will dismiss Miss Carew, and thrust something down his own throat.

When they reopen they reopen upon Lavinia’s ; although, thanks to the seat assigned to the latter by Féodorovna, it is only by turning his head at an awkward angle, that he can get a tolerable view of her ; reopen with an appeal so direct and piteous as to be impossible to misread. Can she—*she* with the free use of her limbs, her wits, do nothing for them ? *Them* ! She has time for a spear-thrust of conscience at the plural pronoun, followed by an equally rapid dart of self-justification. The use of it was *his*, not hers. She only read off his thought as a message is read off from the tape. He, in turn, must read off a negative from hers, since the appeal dies out of his

eyes with disappointed revolt. It is only because a knock at the door has for an instant freed them from supervision, that they are able to exchange even these mute signals.

"I shall not be away more than a minute or two," says Miss Prince, undulating back to the bedside, and speaking in a voice whose exasperation at the interruption and unnecessarily emphatic reassurance contend for the upper hand. "My father has chosen this not very happy moment to send for me; but I shall insist upon his not detaining me long."

She is gone! Blessed, blessed author of the Féodorovna Candle! Long may his dropless tapers enlighten the world! For a moment, though it is daylight, he has lit up the universe for two persons! One of them apparently feels that his tether is a short one, and that he must take time by the forelock. The door has hardly closed before he says—

"You are not sitting in the same place as you did on Monday!"

"No."

The inference that he thinks the change not one for the better is so clear that there would be prudery in ignoring it; and, besides, has not Féodorovna impressed upon her that his lightest whim is to be respected? So she moves with quiet matter-of-factness to the chair originally occupied by her. It cannot be good for his wound that he should slew himself round, as he was doing a moment ago, to get a better prospect of her.

"Thank you! Thank you also a thousand times more for coming to see me again."

"Why shouldn't I come to see you again?"

The question is addressed more to herself in reality than to him, and is an answer to her own misgivings rather than to his gratitude. A slight shade of surprise crosses the eager brightness of his face.

"You did not see your way to it at first, so Mrs. Prince told me."

"I did not want to stand in the way of other visitors," she answers — "my uncle, Rupert," adding with difficulty, "We all claim our part in Bill's friend."

She looks steadily at him, and sees a sort of chill come into his eyes—at her lumping of herself and her family in a cold generalization.

"Rupert!" he says, repeating the name lingeringly, and with an involuntarily reluctant intonation. "Yes; I have heard of Rupert."

"From Bill?"

"Yes, from Bill—and from others."

The slight hesitation that intervenes between "Bill" and the "others" tells her that he knows. How should he not know, indeed? Is it likely that, in his state of tedious invalidhood, he should not have been told any bit of local gossip that might give him a moment's distraction? To him, her engagement to marry Rupert is just a bit of local gossip, neither more nor less. No doubt that the news was imparted—why should it not be?—by Féodorovna.

"So you see," she says, struggling with the senseless feeling of resentment and vexation that has invaded her heart, "my time is not always my own."

"I see!" He lies quite silent for a minute or two, looking out of the window at a burgeoning sycamore, then adds, in a would-be cheerful voice, "It is kind of him to spare you to me for half an hour; but he seemed such a kind fellow when he came to see me the other day: one of my bandages got a little out of gear, and he put it right for me, with a touch as gentle as a woman's."

She repeats "as a woman's," like a parrot, with the bitter thought that even this generously meant encomium takes the feminine shape that all praise of Rupert must do. No one can deny that the bridegroom she has chosen can hold his own as a judge of lace, mender of china, and shaker of pillows, with any expert in either of these three branches of accomplishment in Europe. The cloud on her brow must be a visible one, for the sick man's next remark has a note of doubt and trouble in it.

"I have often heard Bill talk of him. Though they were not alike in externals, nor, I imagine, in tastes, they meant a great deal to each other."

The sentence is evidently intended as a statement, but takes a perverse interrogative twist at the end.

"People may mean a great deal to each other without having a single taste in common," she replies; and the answer leaves on both their minds a painful sense of having incomprehensibly offended

on the one side, and of having bristled in uncalled-for defence on the other.

The sands of their dual solitude are running out, and this is the way in which they are utilizing Féodorovna's absence! In both their minds a feverish reckoning is going on as to how long it will take Miss Prince to send her stork-legs along the corridors and staircases that separate her from her impertinent parent, snub him, and return. Ten minutes is an ample latitude to give her, and of these five must have already fled. They cannot, cannot part upon that jarring last note. The rebellion against doing so is equally strong in both minds, but it is the woman who raises the cry of revolt. It is a cry that has no reference to anything that has passed before, it is only the unruly human heart calling out to its fellow from among the conventions.

"I *am* so glad that you are better!"

"And I *am* so glad that you altered your mind!"

They laugh a little, like two happy children, relieved and blissful at the withdrawn cloud that leaves the blue of their tiny patch of heaven for its one moment undimmed. Both feel that the exchange of those two snapped sentences has turned Miss Prince's prospective return from an unendurable to a quite supportable ill.

"I think that you would find *that* chair"—directing her by an imploring look to one in closer proximity to the bedside than that which she occupies—"a more comfortable one."

"Should I?"

She makes the change. Are not all his whims to be gratified? They can see one another admirably now. He verifies a dimple, and she a scar. He makes no comment on his discovery. She does upon hers.

"You have been wounded before?" she asks, with trembling interest.

He puts his fore finger on a white cicatrice that runs across his lower cheek and jaw.

"*That* bit of a cut! Oh, I got that in the Soudan. It is an old story, and it was nothing worth mentioning. It did not keep me above a week in hospital."

It is clear that he has no wish to pursue the subject; and she refrains, partly in deference to his disinclination, partly from the aboriginal woman's awed joy in the fighting man, partly oppressed by a sense of contrast. When Rupert cut his leg a year ago, over a fallen tree in the wood, he all but fainted at the sight of his own blood! But to Binning she leaves it to start a theme more to his liking.

"I suppose," he says, turning his head sideways on his pillow in a way that hides his scar, and brings her still more perfectly within his range of vision, "that lying on the flat of one's back like a cast sheep makes one see things at an odd angle. You will be surprised to hear that, a few minutes ago, I thought I had offended you."

There is a pause before she answers, "I had offended myself. Don't you think that that is a much worse thing to happen?"

"Do you mean that one can't beg one's own

pardon?" he asks, laughing slightly, yet with curiosity stimulated by the gravity of her manner, and awaiting with eager interest the unriddling of her riddle.

But it remains unriddled. The impulse of each is apparently to flee away from the other's topic. Lavinia looks out of the window, and says, with glad hopefulness—

"In another week you will be able to be carried out-of-doors. You will be too late for the cherry, but the apple blossom will be all ready for you, and then you will come in for the lilacs, the laburnums, the thorns—they are really wonderful in the Park here—the Siberian crabs, the acacias."

"Anything more?" he asks, in tender derision of her long list.

"Plenty," she answers, prepared to continue to bait his appetite for life with more of her joyous enumeration.

"But I shall not be here to see them," he objects. "In a month I may go back, for Roots says so."

The laughter behind her dancing eyes goes out, and the lilt has left the voice that asks, "Did Dr. Roots say so to you? or did you say so to him?"

If he were not bandaged in bed, and an Englishman, Binning would shrug his shoulders. There is a touch of impatience in his—

"Does it matter much which? We said it to each other." Then, stirred by an immense gratitude for her downcast look, he adds gently, "How can I not be in a hurry to go back? Isn't my regiment out there still, and my chief, and all my pals?"

At the sound of his voice, with the fighting ring in it vanquishing the feebleness of sickness, she lifts her head proudly—

“Of course you want to go back,” she says, with an unaccountable sense of partnership in his courage and comradeship; “and I hope you will get well quickly, and be able to do it soon !”

CHAPTER XI

“THERE was never anything happened so unluckily !”

This is the ejaculation with which Mrs. Prince opens one of those forenoon visits to Campion Place, discouraged by the recipients, but at least not so common in her case as in that of her unsnubable daughter. The scene of it has, as often, to be transferred to the Rectory, and in this case the object of the visit must be tracked, by a visitor too eager to await her correctly in the drawing-room, to the linen-room, where, in company with all the Darcy family except its head, she has been witnessing a presentation to the cow-man, on his approaching marriage with the schoolroom maid. The function is happily just concluded before the interruption takes place ; but the wedding gifts lie displayed upon the linen-room table, and are being examined for the twentieth time with critical interest by the young Darcys, of whom both bride and bridegroom are intimate friends, and who have followed the course of their true love with breathless sympathy since Martinmas. They view the arrival of Mrs. Prince with more pleasure than usual, as giving them a fresh gallery to whom to display and

enumerate the nuptial gifts ; and, in any case, are far too courteous and kind-hearted not to be willing to share the elation caused by so joyful an occasion with any chance comer.

“What has happened unluckily ?” asks Lavinia, starting up from her knees, on which she has been requested to descend to examine the quality of a Japanese rug displaying itself gaudily on the floor. To her own heart the question phrases itself differently, “Is he worse ?”

“There is something so perverse in its occurring *now* of all times !” pursues Mrs. Prince, with that provoking keeping of his or her audience on tenter-hooks and in the dark, by a person whose own curiosity is at rest, which one often observes.

“But what is it ? What *has* happened ?” asks Mrs. Darcy, coming to the rescue, and holding in her hand the rolling-pin, which has just been submitted to her for special admiration by her second daughter.

“Of course, it is not her fault ! We cannot blame, we can only pity her !”

“Blame her ! Pity her ! What for ?”

Once again Susan is mouthpiece ; and Lavinia, herself paralyzed by apprehension, blesses her. What has Féodorovna done to him ? Poisoned him with the wrong medicine ? Set fire to his sheets ? Undone his bandages, and let him bleed to death ? To one acquainted with Miss Prince, all these suppositions come well within the range of the probable.

“She is nearly mad herself !” continues Féodo-

rovna's mother. "I have never seen her in such a state !"

Mrs. Darcy lays the rolling-pin quietly down ; and, going over to the intruder, puts a resolute slight hand on her arm.

"I think you ought to tell us what you are talking about ? You are frightening us all !"

"Didn't I tell you !" answers the other, with vague surprise. "I thought you knew ! How stupid of me ! But I have quite lost my head ! So have we all !"

She pauses. And there is a silence, only broken by some one—Mrs. Darcy alone knows who it is—catching her breath.

"Tell us !" says the rector's wife, with low-voiced command, and the enragingly reticent lips obey.

"Féodorovna is ill in bed. She has developed jaundice. It declared itself last night."

"Jaundice ! Féo !" ejaculates Mrs. Darcy, in a tone of such delighted relief as is afterwards commented upon by herself with humorous severity.

"She felt ill when she went to bed last night—overpoweringly sleepy and bilious, and the whites of her eyes looked yellow ; and to-day she is the colour of a guinea !"

Lavinia has subsided again upon her knees, which do not feel quite so strong as usual. The attitude may connote thankfulness as well as inspection.

"Poor Féo !" she says, trying to avoid the key of garish joy in which Susan's utterance was

pitched. "What a dreadful bore for her! How did she get it?"

Mrs. Prince lifts her handsomely dressed shoulders and her *pince-nez*-ed eyes to heaven, as if to refer the question there.

"We had the greatest difficulty in keeping her in bed, until we brought her a looking-glass. She saw then that it was out of the question that he should see her! But she is worrying herself to death over him—oh, not over poor Smethurst: he might die twice a day for all she cared—over Captain Binning, I mean!"

There is another pause, but of a different quality from the scared silence of five minutes ago. In Susan's case it is filled by a cheerfully cynical wonder at the perfect clearness of vision which the sufferer's mother can combine with her maternal tenderness; and, in Lavinia's, with a profound gratitude that, at least, while her hue remains that of the dandelion, Féodorovna's prey will escape her bovril, declarations, and cap-strings.

The children think that their moment has come, and civilly volunteer to show and explain the wedding gifts: to make it clear that both rolling-pin and bread-trencher emanated from the cook; the dolly-tub from Miss Brine; and clothes-pins from the "Tweeny;" that the framed and laurel-crowned "Bobs" is a joint offering from the three elder children; and the smaller "Kitchener" the outcome of the infant Serena's worship of Bellona.

"Mother has just given him her teapot," says

Phillida, in excited explanation. "Doesn't it look exactly like silver? It is an old Sheffield plate pattern; it was to have been presented two days ago, and Sam had his face washed twice in expectation; but we wanted Lavy to be present, and, both times, she was at the Chestnuts."

"That is just where I want her to be again!" answers Mrs. Prince, listening with more good nature and better-feigned attention than her daughter would have done, but reverting to her own pre-occupation—"the poor child"—turning back appealingly to her two grown-up auditors—"has got it into her head that he will be neglected. She and Nurse Blandy have not quite hit it off of late; that no one can look after him properly but herself; though, to tell the truth"—lowering her voice, and in a key of vexed shrewdness—"between ourselves, I think the poor man was on the high-road to be killed with kindness!"

Both matron and maid listen with sympathetic attention; but to neither of them does anything occur in the way of a response that would be meet for the ear of Miss Prince's mother.

"I have my victoria here!" continues that lady, casting an imploring look towards Lavinia; "and I thought, if you would return in it with me, you might pacify her; come and go and take messages between them; convince her that he is having his medicine and his food at the proper hours; and so forth. She is not on speaking terms with Nurse Blandy since nurse complained to Dr. Roots of Féo's taking the case entirely out of her

hands, and *I* always get upon her nerves if I come near her ! ”

Miss Carew's eyes are still fixed upon the Japanese rug, as if appraising its 4s. 11½*d.* merits. To a stranger it would seem as if she did not jump at the proposal.

“It would be a real charity ! ” urges the maker of the suggestion, humbly and insistently. Mrs. Prince in adversity is a more prepossessing figure than Mrs. Prince full of bounce and metaphorical oats ; and, perhaps, it is the perception of this fact that squeezes that reluctant sentence out of Lavinia.

“I should like to help you,” she answers slowly ; “but——”

“But what ? ” cries Mrs. Prince. “If you answer that your gentlemen may want you in the course of the afternoon, you know that it is only a case of sending an order to the stables ! ”

“Your gentlemen are going to desert you to-day, aren't they ? ” puts in Mrs. Darcy, interposing for the first time ; and with a very slight accent, so slight as to be perceptible only to Miss Carew, upon Mrs. Prince's objectionable noun.

“They are obliged to go to London on business—lawyer's business ! ” replies Lavinia, unwillingly making the admission of her unusual freedom.

“For the night ? ” cries Mrs. Prince, jumping at the acknowledgment, as its author had known that she would do. “Then why not come and stay with us ? ”

For a moment no one answers ; only it seems to Lavinia that Mrs. Darcy's eyes echo “Why ! ”

A confused sense of indignation at that look makes itself perceptible for a moment in the girl's mind, followed immediately by a cavilling self-question as to why she should feel it? What reason assignable to any human creature is there for her refusing to perform so natural and easy an act of neighbourliness? Were it poor inglorious little Captain Smethurst to whom she had been requested to minister, would she have hesitated for one moment to comply? With the lifelong record, of which she cannot but be conscious, behind her of matter-of-course obligingnesses and good offices towards her whole *entourage*, is it any wonder that her present grudging attitude has spread a layer of surprised disappointment over her petitioner's countenance?

"Of course I know that he has no claim upon any of you!" she says, with a shrug that seems to give up her cause for lost. "Quite the other way on, in fact! But he is such a lovable sort of fellow, and so disproportionately grateful for any little thing one can do for him; and you all—even Sir George—seemed to wish to make him forget; but I suppose it rankles all the same, and he is the last person not to understand that it should be so."

She turns to go, unaware that her final words, in which she herself sees no particular virtue, have gained the cause she had abandoned as lost.

"*Rankles!*" repeats Lavinia, turning quite white, and in a voice of inexpressible horror. "Is it possible that you can think?—that you can imagine——?"

"I really do not know what I think," replies

Mrs. Prince, in a voice pettish from worry of mind and startled puzzledom at the dynamitic effect of her last sentence. "When you see a person, whom you have always found ready to put herself in four for you, suddenly making difficulties when you are in a tight place, and when it really would not cost her much to help you, one does not know what to think, does one, Mrs. Darcy?"

"*Has Lavinia made a difficulty?*" asks the person thus erected into umpire, and looking with quiet directness of inquiry into her friend's face. "I think you have not given her time for either 'yes' or 'no' yet!"

"Which is it to be?" cries Mrs. Prince, wheeling round with revived hope upon her victim. "It may as well be yes!"—with all her tone can carry of persuasion. "You will have none of the disagreeables of nursing. What I ask of you is just to sit by his bedside and chat to him; and to keep Féo quiet by persuading her that we are not killing him by neglect in her absence."

None of the disagreeables of nursing! It is, then, to a selfish shrinking from contact with his pain, that her hesitation is attributed. The stingingness of the injustice, which would be ludicrous in its divergence from fact, if it were not so cruel, drives back the blood to Lavinia's cheeks, and the words to her lips.

"There *are* no disagreeables in this case, and if there were, I should not be afraid of them!" she says, with a quiet dignity which is felt to carry a rebuke with it, "I will gladly come."

"You *are* a trump!" cries Mrs. Prince, breaking, in the excitement of her relief, into a phrase, the old-fashioned slanginess of which the elegance of her calmer moments would disapprove, and making a snatch, which meets only the empty air, at Miss Carew's hands. "Let us be off this very instant, or we shall find Féo running about the passages, though her temperature is up at 102, and she is as yellow as a guinea!"

"I *must* see my uncle and Rupert first," says Lavinia, so resolutely that her visitor recognizes it is useless to contest the point. "Hadn't you better return without me, and I will follow as soon as I can?"

"You will not go back upon your word?" asks the other suspiciously. Then verifying a look of indignant repudiation in the girl's eyes, she adds, "No; I am sure you will not! Well, perhaps it had better be as you say. I will send back the victoria at once for you; or would you prefer the brough-am?" Its owner gives the vehicle in question the value of two good syllables. "If it looks the least like rain, I will send the brough-am."

She bustles off as she speaks, one rustle and jingle of gratitude, relief, and jet; but not before she has seen Lavinia speeding before her through the churchyard back to her home. Did she but know how much the hurry in the girl's veins towards their common goal exceeds her own, her urgency would die, smothered in stupefaction.

Rupert is in his room, guiding and aiding the footman in the packing of his clothes, and of the

few volumes and knick-knacks without which he never moves. At her call he at once joins her in the passage, leaving, as she notes with relief, the door ajar behind him.

"I have come to say good-bye," she says brusquely, still breathless from her run.

"*Good-bye!*" he repeats. "Why, we need not start for an hour yet."

"No," she answers with the same short-breathed determination in her voice; "but *I* must. I am going to the Chestnuts for the night. Mrs. Prince has been here, and has forced me into it."

The words are strictly and literally true; and yet their utterer feels the immenseness of the falsity their reluctance implies as she speaks them.

His face expresses surprise, but no disapproval.

"They want me to help to amuse Captain Binning," continues Lavinia, still with that lying disinclination for the proposed occupation in her tone; "and persuade Féo that they are not killing him with neglect in her absence!"

"*In her absence!*" repeats Rupert, with an accent of the most acute astonishment. "Do you expect me to believe that that angel of mercy has forsaken her post?"

"She has got the jaundice!"

"The *jaundice!*" repeats the young man, with more of entertainment than compassion in his low laugh. "Poor Féo! The yellow danger! What on earth has given her over as a prey to it at this cruelly unpropitious moment?"

"I do not know."

"And you are to nurse dear Binning instead of her? What a blessed, blessed change for him!"

There is not the faintest trace of jealousy in his tone, and the most unaffected friendliness in his mention of the sick man; but she wishes that he had not called him "dear." It makes her illogically feel more of a traitor than before; and, besides, is it quite manly?

"I am to sit with him this afternoon," she answers in a tone of caustic discontent, "and convince that idiot Féodorovna that he is not being poisoned or starved. It will only be for to-day," she adds, more as a satisfaction to her own conscience than as an explanation in the least called for by him. "And to-morrow you will both be back!"

"Even if we are, you must not hurry home!" replies Rupert, with that complete unselfishness which his family has grown so used to as barely to be aware of. "I am so boomed just now, that I can run the show without you for an indefinite time. He actually asked my opinion this morning," opening his eyes wide and smiling; then, growing grave again, "and I always feel that we none of us can do enough to make that poor chap feel at his ease with us!"

She looks up at him in a dumb appreciation of his delicacy and feeling, that has no pleasure, nay, a leaven of unmistakable pain in it; and looking realizes that he is paler than his never high-coloured wont. Admirably as he disguises it, is it a sacrifice that he is making? Does he divine?

"You look as white as a sheet," she says, with

a sudden impulse to know the worst. "What has happened to you?"

"You will be angry with me if I tell you that I have had a fright!" he answers, smiling again, deprecatingly this time. "But that is about what it comes to. My father made them put the young horse into the cart, when I went to Shipstone this morning. And we met one of those steam-rollers; and he took fright and bolted."

"And you could not hold him?"

"I was not driving. You know I never do, if I can help it. I do not see the use of keeping a dog and barking one's self!"

"Well?"

"Oh, you need not be afraid that I did anything unworthy of a man and a gentleman!" noting with slightly ironical comment the apprehension in her face. "I sat tight, and Hodson pulled him up just in time to stop him taking the gates at the level crossing. But you know that nerves are not my strong point; and it gave them a bit of a jar!"

Her face has hardened and stiffened. "A man has no business to have nerves!"

"What is he to do if God has presented him with a large bundle of them at his birth?"

The question is unanswerable, and on this unsatisfactory note they part. It sounds out of tune-ly all through her short drive, and makes a discord of it. White as a table-cloth because a horse shied!

CHAPTER XII

"Féo has given strict orders that you are to be shown up to her *first*."

These are the words with which the patient's mother receives Miss Carew, and they are wafted on a sigh of relieved gratitude, and accompanied by the admission that she has herself been ejected from the sick-room, and requested not to reappear there until further orders. The occasion is evidently considered to be one of such magnitude as to have summoned from his certificate-hung study Mr. Prince to join his acknowledgments to those of his wife; but the elaborate expression of his thanks, with its inevitable prefix of "I do not wish to be intrusive," is cut short by a peremptory inquiry, transmitted by Féodorovna's maid, as to the cause of the delay in showing up the visitor.

"She will give you the most minute directions," says Mrs. Prince, hurrying Lavinia off upon this mandate, and speaking in a flurried semi-whisper. "You must consent to everything, and"—lowering her voice still further—"of course you can use your own judgment afterwards."

"There is not a soul in the house I can trust," says Féodorovna, clutching Miss Carew's hand in

a clasp whose feverishness her own cool palm verifies. "Do not pay the slightest attention to anything Nurse Blandy says. She is absolutely untrustworthy and incapable."

Lavinia nods, mindful of Mrs. Prince's directions.

"In this dreadful *contretemps* it is something to have a person on whose honesty at least one can rely," continues Féodorovna, staring tragically at Lavinia out of her yellowed eyes. "You have some sympathy—some comprehension of what it must be to me to be tied down here, *now* of all times."

There is no insincerity in Lavinia's gesture of assent. Despite the absolute lack of foundation for Miss Prince's belief in her own indispensability, and the ludicrous effect with which a solemn sentimentality gilds her already gilded features, Miss Carew's compassion is genuine, and even acute. To be within five doors of him, and yet parted as effectually as if oceans rolled between them! A shocked flash of realization of what such a deprivation would be to herself dries up effectually any of that inclination to mirth which the preposterousness of Féodorovna's pretensions, coupled with that of her appearance, would naturally produce.

"You must come and go between us," continues the patient, earnestly. "Tell me how he is from hour to hour, prevent his fretting more than he can help, and ensure him against the neglect which hitherto only my own personal and incessant attention has guarded him from."

A mechanical mandarin-like movement agitates Lavinia's head.

"Of course you do not know anything of the technicalities of nursing—how should you?—but you can at least follow my directions."

"Yes."

"Do not sit too close to him."

"No."

"Do not talk too much."

"No."

"Let him choose his own topic."

A profound sigh follows this last injunction, which somehow implies that there can be little doubt as to what that topic will be.

"Yes."

"Make as light of my illness as you can."

"Yes."

"And come back to me every quarter of an hour to report progress."

"Every quarter of an hour!" repeats Miss Carew, for once forgetful of and disobedient to her instructions as to unhesitating acquiescence in everything that might be suggested to her. "But you may be asleep!"

"And if I am!" returns Miss Prince, with such an expression of high-flown enthusiasm on her discoloured countenance as makes Lavinia's pity almost succumb to an unpardonable inclination to laugh.

She escapes at last without having disgraced herself by any overt evidence of amusement, though her departure is delayed by the determination of Miss Prince to invest her messenger in her own cap and apron.

"He has grown used to having them about

him," says Féo, with pensive peremptoriness ; while a recollection of ill-controlled cap-strings gambolling across patient eyes confirms the statement in the hearer's mind, and she sets forth reluctantly equipped in an attire which, like David's, she has not proved.

Admitted by Nurse Blandy with a lofty cordiality which speaks less for her own merit than for the lustre with which she shines by contrast with Féodorovna, Lavinia finds herself once more standing by that bedside whence her spirit has so rarely stirred since the day, which now seems so incomputably distant, when first her lagging feet carried her thither. Their hands lie in each other's with the large sense of freedom that the absence of any onlooker gives ; the consciousness that, as far as any one to note their clasp goes, they may remain in thrilled contact from now till night. As if in malicious acting upon the knowledge that such a course would be the most distasteful possible to her young employer, Nurse Blandy has hastened to leave them *tête-à-tête*. In their eyes, as they rush to meet, each reads the other's joyous elation in the thought that not only is there no Féodorovna present to cramp and chill their greeting, but that all through the long wealth of the afternoon to be theirs no opening door need scare them with the swishing announcement of her paralyzing presence.

"So I have a new nurse !" he says, his look wandering with slow delight over the array that had made her feel like a mummer.

"Miss Prince thought that, as you were used to the dress, it would be better that I should wear it."

"Yes ; I am used to the dress."

The implication that he is *not* used to the wearer is so clear to them both, as to draw a little gauzy veil of shyness between them.

"I feel rather like Jacob, having jockeyed Esau out of his occupation," she says, talking somewhat at random ; the more so for the consciousness that his eyes have done with her cap and apron, and now find employment in the string of pearls that, as both of them know, owes no ascription to Féodorovna. Involuntarily one of Lavinia's hands goes up to her throat, with the impulse to hide the jewels, though a cold instinct tells her that he has already discovered their origin.

"It is very hard upon my predecessor, isn't it," she says, beginning to talk much faster than her wont, "to have developed such an enthusiasm for nursing, and then to have her course barred by so odious a form of illness ?"

"Jaundice, isn't it ?" returns he, with a very respectable and even remorseful effort at regret.

"Yes ; jaundice."

"Poor soul !"

Both read in each other's hearts that, as between them, talk of Féodorovna is sheer waste of time ; yet one of them clings convulsively to her as a safe topic.

"What aggravates her vexation is that she can't believe that you will not be starved and ill-used in her absence !"

"Poor soul !"

There is a touch of impatience that to one

initiated speaks of past endurance in the repeated phrase ; and the smile that sends up the corners of both their mouths, when Lavinia adds demurely, "I am to report progress every quarter of an hour," makes them both feel rather guilty.

It is the man who instinctively breaks away from the subject, and, as one determined to have his will, rushes headforemost into another.

"Tell me how much time you are going to give me ! I had rather know at once."

His eye seeks the travelling-clock standing on the table beside him, and as he turns somewhat to get an exacter view of it, she notes with how much greater ease and freedom he can move.

"I have come to stay the night."

"*The night !*"

"Yes ; the night. My men have left me and gone to London."

She answers colourlessly, looking straight before her ; but through her drooped eyelids her spirit sees the almost incredulous delight of his.

There is a moment's pause ; next, in a long sigh of relief, come the words—

"Then we shall have time for everything !"

She smiles with slow relish of and acquiescence in his thought, despite the apparent protest in her—

"That is rather comprehensive, isn't it ?"

"I mean," he continues, eagerly sitting up, and leaning on his elbow, "that after your former visits I have always felt that we—that I had not made the most of them ; but that I had egotistically frittered away our time"—neither of them notes the

significance of the plural pronoun—"talking of myself."

"Did you talk of yourself?" she asks. "I think your memory plays you false then. If you had, I should," with embarrassed playfulness, "know more about you than I do."

"What do you know? What do you care to know?"

"I know that you have had a bullet through your left lung, and one that passed very close to your heart; and that, under these circumstances, it would be wiser not to gesticulate much," she answers, with a pretty air of admonishment, and of recalling to both their minds her temporary function, which seems to him to sit upon her more exquisitely than any of her former expressions or gestures.

"Did I gesticulate?" he asks. "One gets rather tired of moving nothing but one's head, and you must not be hard upon me to-day, for I am rather down on my luck. At least I *was*!"

"About Féodorovna?"

"Oh no! At least—of course yes. But that was not what I was alluding to. I have seen"—eyes and hands seeking among the newspapers with which the bed is strewn—"that one of my pals has been badly hit."

In a moment she is beside him. "Let me help you. Which paper is it in?"

"In them all! It is official from Lord Roberts." He has found the paragraph, and hands it to her, indicating it with a pale fore finger.

"On February 28th, General —— and his

staff narrowly escaped being captured by a party of the enemy, and were only saved by the presence of mind and gallantry of Captain Greene of the — Hussars. Captain Greene had been sent back by the General to order a company of infantry up to the kopje taken on the previous night by the Australian Bushmen. On his way he saw superior numbers of the enemy creeping up a donga, with the obvious intention of surprising General — and his staff. With great presence of mind he galloped across ground in full view of the enemy, ordering up reinforcements. Having accomplished his object, Captain Greene recrossed the bullet-swept zone to inform the General of the position, in doing which he was severely wounded in the head and neck, but, though reeling in his saddle, regained the kopje, imparted his discovery, and thereby averted an otherwise inevitable disaster."

Lavinia's eyes race through the record, and, having done so, raise themselves to Binning's. Passionately alive as she is to deeds of daring, at this moment the desire to find something consoling to say to the hero's friend is even more prominent in her mind and look than admiration of the valiant act.

"It says 'severely,' not 'dangerously,'" is her low-voiced comment; "and even 'dangerously' does not always mean *mortally*. You were put in as 'dangerously.'"

He thanks her with an eye-flash for the recollection; but a moment later his hands, so quiet in their patience generally, are uneasily pulling at the embroidered coverlet, which Féodorovna has

contributed from her treasures to his luxury, and which Nurse Blandy *will* call a "bed-spread."

"I cannot think why they do not let me get up. Roots has promised that I shall be able to return to duty by the end of May; and here we are at the beginning!"

The end of May! It is, then, to the same spot in time that his eyes and heart are directed, as are her own; but with how unimaginable a difference! To him the end of May is to bring release, liberty, return to the "bullet-swept zones," to the cold veldt, the ambush, and the sniping. Yes, but also to the comradeship after which his soul is lusting. While to *her*!

"May is young yet," she says, forcing her lips into a reassuring smile. "Dr. Roots has twenty-five days in which to keep his word."

His hands cease their restless plucking at the counterpane, and a change passes over his face. Has he divination to read beneath the mask of her smile? she asks herself with a sort of terror.

"Twenty-five days!" he repeats softly. "They are a great many; and yet I can fancy their seeming very few."

Her self-command does not go so far as to furnish her with a comment upon this thrilling truism; and the air upon which his next words steal out seems to have been stilled to receive them.

"I wonder upon how many of those twenty-five I shall have a sight of you?"

"Let us take short views of life, as Sidney Smith bids us," she answers, involuntarily moving her

shoulders, as if to shake off from them a load which, at the moment, seems to press as heavily as did the bursting wallet of his sins upon good Christian's bowed back. "I will come as often as I can be spared from home."

At that they regard one another steadily, each conveying to the other's consciousness their knowledge of how much more than appears the phrase carries.

"You have naturally *a great deal to do* just now?"

"Yes."

It is not true; but what is the use of explaining that the dull change—dull, except in the one awful main fact of her wifehood—causes little alteration in the outward framework of her life? Again the room seems irksomely still. Is it possible that to two pairs of ears even the swish of Miss Prince's skirts would be welcome? In one respect Lavinia might meet that lady with a clear conscience, since she has undoubtedly obeyed her behest of allowing the wounded man to choose his own topic; but it can hardly be said *to* have agreed with him, judging by the grey shadows on his face. Yet he will not leave the theme that has brought them there.

"It is to be on the 28th?"

"Yes."

He has leant back on the pillows, which are propped into a more convalescent slant than on the day when she had first seen him lying flat and bloodless upon them. Yet he has reusurped the privilege granted to those *in extremis*; and she grows restless under the insistence of his eyes.

"I should like to give you a present."

"Oh, why should you?"

There is no mistaking her start, and the pain and dissent in her tone.

"You had rather that I did not?"

"Much rather."

CHAPTER XIII

"No bad news, I hope?"

"None, thanks."

It is at the breakfast-table next morning that this question and answer are exchanged. They are the result of the wire which has just been handed to Lavinia, and which she continues looking at, long after she must have mastered its contents—so long that the hostess's curiosity conquers her good breeding, and makes her take for granted sender and subject.

"Does Mr. Rupert say by what train he and Sir George are returning?"

There is a pause, though slightly perceptible.

"They cannot get back to-day; the papers were not ready for their signature, after all."

"The law's delay! We all know something about that," says Mr. Prince, looking up with a smile of elaborate sympathy from his porridge. "Will legislation ever effect anything towards——?"

"It is an ill wind that blows nobody good," cries Mrs. Prince, cutting ruthlessly into her husband's speculation. "Since there is nobody to go back to, what sense is there in your going back?"

* * * * *

"I have only *one* little hint to give you, dear,"

says Mrs. Prince, escorting her visitor to the wounded man's door, and in a tone tinged with apology ; "but you know what an impracticable patient Féo is, and we must give in to sick people's whims, as she was always impressing upon us about Captain Binning."

"Yes?"

"Well, dear, it is too silly and exacting of her ; but she complains that there were three quarters of an hour between your first and second visits to her yesterday, and forty-five minutes between your second and third."

"Were there?" rather blankly.

"If the same thing happens to-day, she threatens to get up and go and see for herself what's happening. Dr. Roots tells her he will not answer for the consequences if she does ; but she snaps her fingers at him. However," with reassurance, "my one confidence is in her *colour*!"

• • • • •
They meet without the elation of yesterday, their eyes shirking each other, and their hands taking for granted that contact is superfluous. Half a score of subjects had yesterday succeeded her refusal of his suggested gift ; but the sting of that rebuff still inflames their memories.

"This is an uncovenanted mercy!" he says, with a rather strained smile. "I was afraid that I had seen the last of you."

"I heard from my people, that they cannot get back to-day."

"So you stay here?"

"Yes."

There is a lifelessness in the little dialogue, she expressing no regret, and he no gladness. When the eyes, dropped upon her work—she had no work yesterday—give him an opportunity of covert observation, he sees that her large eyelids look thickened as if with tears or watching.

"The law is a very odd thing, isn't it?" she says presently in a staccato key.

"I have never had many dealings with it."

"It is the only vehicle to which civilization has not given C-springs and indiarubber tires. It still jolts and lumbers along as it did three hundred years ago."

His look asks for an explanation of her forced yet commonplace analogy, and she goes on.

"In the matter of marriage settlements for instance, both sides may be perfectly at one as to the disposition of the money; and yet the law insists on finding flaws and making difficulties."

"I suppose it does."

"Some hitch of the kind is detaining my uncle and Rupert."

She cannot be more uncomfortably conscious that the explanation is superfluous and uncalled for, than is he that her trite reflections and unasked-for introduction of her financial affairs are the stairs by which she is climbing to some aimed-at goal. In her next sentence she attains it.

"Talking of marriages reminds me——"
Even when the door to which she has been looking is reached, it seems hard to open.

"Yes?"

"I have been thinking that I owe you an apology."

"For what?"

"For the spirit in which I received a very kind suggestion you made."

"What suggestion?"

It is needless to say that he knows as well as she what was the contemned overture; yet—for Love is by no means a kindly god—he cannot deny himself the luxury of seeing her run up the red pennon of shame into her cheeks. But when he notes what uphill work it is to her to give the asked-for explanation, and how conscientiously she does it, his heart smites him with an acuteness that brings its own retribution.

"To give me a wedding present."

"I was sorry that I had put you to the pain of refusing." His tone is very gentle, and not in the least rancorous.

"Do you know why I refused?"

"I had a twinge of my old misgivings."

For a moment—so complete is her innocence of the motive hinted at—she looks at sea. Then his meaning flashes painfully upon her. He supposes that from the causer of Bill's death no member of Bill's family can bring him or herself to accept a gift.

"Whatever your misgiving was, it was wrong," she says, the eager desire to reassure him giving her a momentary glibness in conspicuous contrast to the lameness of her former speech. "You could not

possibly have guessed the real reason ; it would have required a more than human intuition."

"Are you going—are you able to tell it me?"

"Yes, now." She pauses a moment, as if to collect herself, and set her facts in order. "I must explain to you," she says, "that my marriage is not like other marriages."

"I do not understand."

It would be better taste, as he feels, to allow her to tell her tale to its end, without remark ; but she makes a slight halt, and the delay is unendurable.

"I mean that it is no occasion for festivity or present-giving. I intended no slight to you ; I only saw that you misunderstood."

This time he has himself better in hand, for no comment follows ; but she, verifying by one snatched look the miserable mystification of his face, hurries out her next words.

"It is the carrying out of a bargain made almost further back than memory can reach."

"Do you mean——" —whether it be through the weakness of his body or the rebellion of his spirit, the words are spoken almost below his breath —"that you have tied yourself for life by a childish promise to another child?"

She draws up head and neck in a way that he feels to convey a dignified reproof.

"There is no question of tying. I am doing it absolutely of my own free will. All my life I have known that for me there was to be no another man than Rupert ; and all his life he has known that for him there was to be no other woman than me !"

If any incredulity born of experience or observation invades the soul of Rupert's brother man at this large assertion, no sign of it appears. He only waits blankly.

"I am up to my neck in debt to them—to both of them!" goes on the poor girl, losing something of her collectedness, and torn between the knowledge that wisdom bids her leave the picture of her past and future without further touches; and the impossibility of not making it clear to her pale hearer, that love—lover-love—has no part in the scheme of her existence. "I am up to my neck in debt to them, and this is the first instalment I have ever been able to pay!"

"I see."

She sighs, and throws out her arms as if tossing away something irksome.

"Now let us talk of something else."

But a topic, thus ordered up, comes with a limp; and they get lamely enough through the next hour; the bulletins to Féodorovna are delivered with a punctuality unknown on happier yesterday. It is only gradually that comfort and fluency return to them, the knowledge of the one subject which has to be skirted round, making all others seem dangerous. The war-map hung at the foot of the bed proves their best ally. In moving its pins and flags, and making out, with the nearest approach to accuracy, the scene of Captain Greene's exploit, they grow almost easy and almost garrulous.

"What have you been talking about?" is the first question put by Miss Prince on the next

scrupulously paid visit of report made by the amateur nurse.

Féodorovna has managed to fidget her temperature up to a higher point than yesterday's, and the orange of her face is patched with the flushings of fever.

"About the war."

"What about the war?"

"I have been moving the pins and flags on the war-map, in accordance with to-day's news."

"You ought not to let him mention the war."

"I think it would be worse harm to forbid him. He would only brood the more over Captain Greene's wounds."

"You seem to be much better informed on the subject than I am"—very fretfully. "What else have you talked about?"

"Nothing much."

"I hope you have not told him that my temperature has gone up."

"No."

"Of course he asked?"

"Of course."

It is with the weight of this falsehood upon her soul that Lavinia returns to her charge. It does not sit very heavily, and is probably not a falsehood at all, since all the inquiries in question have, no doubt, been addressed to Nurse Blandy or Mrs. Prince, before her own appearance on the scene. And whether because a little of the former awkwardness makes him glad of a topic ready to his hand, or that his conscience smites him with an earlier

negligence, he really does put the orthodox query this time.

"Well, how is she?"

Lavinia shakes her head. "Poor thing! I am afraid her overhaste to be well will very much retard her cure. You had better take warning by her!"

There is a pretty admonishment in her voice, and in the face, which is gentled beyond its never ungentle wont by a diminution of colour. He rolls his head about on the pillow.

"Am I in such overhaste to be well? Or do I only pretend it?"

"I do not think you are a very good hand at pretending," she answers, with a flickering smile.

• • • • •

And now the day is done. Has some new Joshua issued a contrary command to that which the first one sent over the wrecked Syrian town, and bid the sun double his speed to the west?

"Sleep well," Lavinia says.

At his request, and by the condescension of Nurse Blandy, she has gone in to bid him good night at her own bedtime, and long after her services have been dispensed with. The electric light is out, and the moonlight, for whose continued admission during another few minutes he has begged, sleeps in faintly glorious bars and islands on the bed. Long and ghostly he lies there, and ghostly she leans over him. The pallid interrupted light—so interrupted that in a second either of them can withdraw from it under the shield of darkness—gives them a

confidence and expansiveness unknown throughout the day. They feel something of the freedom of two innocently tender spirits freed from the shams and prohibitions of the flesh.

“Sleep well !”

She is stooping over him to enable her to see him, and one hand lies on the turned-over sheet. It looks so unearthly that he must think there is no contravention of rules made for the material and the real in carrying it to his ghostly lips. But the unspiritual contact, novel and most sweet, effectually breaks through the ethereal figment.

“Do not wish me ‘sleep :’ wish me a blessed lying dream !”

* * * * *

How deep is Lavinia's thankfulness that Miss Prince's ignorance of this irregular interview saves her from the awful necessity of at once accounting for and relating it. She reaches her own room, trembling and unstrung. So complete has been her fidelity to Rupert, unconscious of the unusual in its absoluteness, that no man has ever before kissed even her hand, the hand which is so often a wicket-gate leading to the palace of the lips. By the electric light she looks at her right hand—it was the right—which has been desecrated, is it ? or for ever ennobled ?—her practical, capable right hand, beautiful in shapely strength ; and her first feeling is one of regret that it is not more satin-soft, more smoothly worthy of his lips. Shame that at such a crisis—for to her inexperience it seems one—so unworthy an impulse should predominate, burns hotly. But, all

the same, the regret holds its own, and keeps its original start.

The "dazzled morning moon" and the uprising sun find her still a watcher.

"I have lost a whole night's sleep because a sick man kissed my hand out of gratitude," she says to herself, when her eyes at length close upon the already roseing clouds. "That is sensible!"

Waking brings with it a healthier view of the episode that had cost her such a vigil—brings an effort to deride herself for attaching so much importance to what was doubtless a very commonplace form of acknowledgment. Her yesterday's explanation returns with a certain power of soothing upon her conscience. It showed more than doubtful taste in her to volunteer it; but, at all events, he now knows that her marriage with Rupert is an unalterable certainty, and that lover-love has no part in it. Why it should be unendurable to leave an acquaintance of a fortnight's standing under the belief that she is influenced by the ordinary motives, she omits to ask herself. But it is with a brave face of open friendliness that she presents herself at his bedside, and he asks himself by what juggle it had seemed to him that last night her spirit had kissed his in the moonlight.

In the afternoon she returns to Campion Place, bidding her patient good-bye with staid kindness, but making no mention of a possible return. She is on the doorstep, with a bright face to welcome back "her men."

The young horse, which Sir George is driving,

shies badly at barking Geist, with a foolish pretence of not recognizing him as his own family dog ; and Lavinia would give anything that her eyes had not flown suspiciously to Rupert, to note whether his hand is nervously gripping the side of the dog-cart.

It is fortunate for her that both her travellers are too much occupied with their own misadventures to ask her many questions about the disposition of her time. The trip has been neither satisfactory nor final. An entry in a baptismal registry is not to be found, and a second, if not a third visit to the lawyers will probably be necessary. Two dull evenings have been passed at a hotel, as Sir George, with his usual ingenuity in making life as disagreeable to himself as he can, has morosely refused to spend them at any place of entertainment ; and Rupert—as seems a matter of course to them all—has foregone his own friends and pastimes to keep him company.

The only bright spots in their history appear to be that Rupert, who to his other graces adds a connoisseurship in old silver, has picked up a George III. Loving-cup at a shop in the Strand for an old song ; and that Sir George has met with some patterns of wall-paper that please him for two rooms which have not been used of late years, and in whose doing-up he takes an interest in striking contrast to his usually absolute indifference to the internal details of his household.

“They would make a nursery look nice and bright,” he says, displaying them to his niece, and speaking with that uncompromising outspokenness

of his hopes, which has often before inflamed her cheeks.

It is with an inward convulsion of dismay that she realizes how enormously her repulsion for the topic, thus introduced with Saxon simplicity, has grown since it was last broached to her. Yet she must get used to it. She has never hitherto flinched from the necessary and the actual. There *will* be, in all human probability, a nursery ; there *will* be children ; and they will be hers—theirs.

“Yes, very bright and pretty.”

He looks at her with a touch of solicitude, though without a grain of suspicion.

“Have you got a cold ? I always tell you that you go too thinly clad.”

“No, thanks ; not in the least. Why do you think so ?”

“Your voice sounded hoarse, as if your tonsils were relaxed.”

But Lavinia's tonsils are all right.

CHAPTER XIV

"A côté du bonheur"

"ALL these things are against me !"

Seven days are gone since Lavinia was called upon to exult over the nursery hangings, and there is no exultation, even feigned, in the tone with which she quotes to herself the words of Jacob, running over in her head what "these things" are. It is "against her" that the search for the missing baptismal entry, now complicated by doubt as to the whereabouts of the register in which it was made, has motived another absence on the part of her bridegroom and uncle. It is against her that this fact has come to Mrs. Prince's ears, and has brought a hailstorm of invitations, entreaties, and reproaches about Miss Carew's head. It is against her that Féodorovna, having with a headstrong insanity, even stronger than her vanity, insisted on visiting Binning, has succeeded in improving upon her original malady by an attack of pneumonia, and brought herself to death's door.

As she unquietly paces the garden at Campion Place, waiting for the Princes' victoria to convey her to the Chestnuts, Lavinia, dolefully probing her conscience, asks it which of the causes that have

added their weight to each other till their momentum has grown irresistible, can be, in any common fairness, laid at her door ; and she can detect no unjust bias in her own favour in the "not one" that answers her inward inquisition.

On the elms' little leaves in the giant espaliered hedge that parts her from the churchyard is the glisten of that sunshine that has just been luring them into life ; on the dazzling emerald grass "nice-eyed" wagtails are walking with balanced tails at the foot of the old grey wall which, on the left side of the demesne, drops down a matter of ten feet to the croquet lawn below. She, looking absently over, can see the large-flowered periwinkle staring up at her, and the heaven-shaming blue of the forget-me-not fringe. The sight of the latter blossoms causes her a twinge of discomfort. She had worn a little bunch of them in her white coat, and at his leave-taking, a quarter of an hour ago, Rupert had deliberately unpinned and annexed them. Could he have intended any rebuke or admonishment by an action unlike him in its something of cool ownership ? Yet there was certainly nothing of overweening confidence or masterdom in the words with which he had answered her at the moment, sincerely meant and felt—

"This is really too bad."

"Has absence made the heart grow fonder ?" he asks, with a light lip-raillery, which the restrained yet legible wistfulness of his eyes contradicts. "When I see a wave of hatred coming on, I shall know what remedy to apply."

She has taught him to be sparing of endearments. Yet even he must expect some trifling kindness at parting. It weighs upon her conscience after he is gone that she had deftly chosen a moment when the butler was passing through the hall to bid him her final good-bye.

"All these things are against me !"

Yet even while she repeats the Biblical phrase aloud, to give it greater solidity, a sense of her own hypocrisy comes hotly home to her.

All these things are against her. But is there nothing for her too? Isn't the May month for her? and the temporary freedom assured to her fifteen minutes ago? and her own heart, capering and curvetting, under all its pack-load of scruples and compunctions?

"For" and "against." In what a double and contradictory sense is she using both prepositions! She pulls herself up muddled and uneasy, yet helped out of her puzzle by the delicious egotistical noise a thrush is making on a bough near by, insisting on telling all passers-by, at the top of his voice, how well his suit has thriven. A phrase out of one of Keats' Letters recurs to her *à propos* of a like feathered Anacreon—

"That thrush is a fine fellow. I hope he has made a good choice this year."

Happy thrush, to be in a position to make a choice! Daily, or almost daily, as have been Lavinia's visits to the wounded man, she never fails before each one to feel afresh the same almost sick excitement as to the precise method of their meeting.

To a not very observant onlooker there would not seem to be much variety in their salutations, but to her now practised eye and ear, there lies an infinite range of gradations between the clouded gladness of his mute, yet how legible, "It is very good of your owner to lend you to me for yet another hour!" and the equally mute uncalculating exultation that knows no to-morrow of "You are here!"

To-day she might have spared herself the daily fever of her speculation, since their meeting is to fall out in quite a new manner, and under safe conditions of large chaperonage. Captain Binning is no longer either in bed or in the room which has been the scene of their whole acquaintance. He has been moved several hours ago into the adjoining room, and now lies on a sofa drawn up to the window. He is still pillow-backed and more than semi-recumbent; but he is "up" and the first step has been taken towards the fulfilment of Dr. Roots' promise.

Lavinia's heart first bounds and then drops stone-like at the sight. Thank God, he has reached the first milestone on the high-road to health and vigour. How many more will take him beyond her ken? No man can fight the enemies of his country in bandages and a nightingale, but from grey flannel to khaki is but a step! Captain Binning is, as one glance at the *mise en scène* informs her, giving a housewarming in honour of his convalescence. The prudence of the step may be doubted, but that it is being enjoyed by guests and host is indubitable.

In compliance with his request, backed by their

own much urgency, the rector's wife has brought her young family to be presented to the first live hero they have ever seen, and all have arrived laden with the objects that seem to them most likely to support his spirits. With their usual eager kindheartedness, they have stripped their walls and dressing-tables of the photographs of the adored generals, and disposed them for exhibition within easy reach of Captain Binning's eye and hand. Phillida has brought the new poodle, who wears the portraits of as many military men as can be induced to stick there, in midget size, in his hair, and Daphne introduces a female dove, in whom the friends of General Pole-Carew would be surprised to recognize that son of Mars. Mrs. Darcy sits by the sofa-side, putting in an observation when she has the chance, but, with her usual wise easy-goingness, not attempting to arrest the flow of enraptured questions which she knows that a word or a sign from her can at once check, and which evokes such amused answers as cannot be produced by the weary or the overdone.

At the moment of Lavinia's entry two inquiries are shooting from as many eager mouths at her patient, "Have you kept the bullet?" and "How often have you spoken to Bobs?" Half a dozen sparkling eyes await the answer; since, though Christopher has returned to school, little Serena is here, and staring with the rest. Surprise that one who has hitherto been so obligingly ready with his responses should now remain silent and look oddly over the tops of their hats instead of answering, makes them turn their own necks to discover the cause,

and in the next moment they are surrounding Miss Carew, and liberally sharing their delightful gains in knowledge with her.

"Oh, Lavy! *Did* you know that Captain Binning has the same Christian name as Bobs?"

Lavinia did know it, as well as a good many other facts about the object of the children's interest, which he is less likely to have imparted to them; but she is spared the necessity of owning it by Captain Binning, who puts in, with a laugh whose altered quality puzzles the keen-eared young people—

"It is so far down in my long string that it scarcely counts."

"Captain Binning has three Christian names," explains Daphne, in kind elucidation; and Phillida hastens to strike in glibly, before her sister can anticipate her—

"Edward Carruthers Frederick Binning."

"Two too many," says the owner of the names, laughing again. But, as the children remark to their mother in the waggonette on their homeward road, claiming her confirmation of the fact, there is still something odd about him.

She shuts their mouths unexpectedly. "It was his civil way of letting you know that he was tired! You know that with strangers and invalids a little of you goes a long way."

The explanation is not flattering, but is received without offence.

The Rectory adieux to the newly found hero are made much earlier than his votaries think at all necessary or desirable. But though a few moments

before Lavinia's entry, he had stoutly denied the accusation of fatigue and the offer of departure, a quarter of an hour later he tamely acquiesces in both.

"You will come again soon, and bring the Siege Train," he says at parting, and with something that might be compunctious in his tone, to the disappointed children; "and I'll tell you all I know about Bobs. I do not think it is nearly as much as you know yourselves," he adds laughing.

He shakes hands with Phillida and Daphne, and kisses Serena and the poodle—the latter by request—and they are gone.

Strong emotion is often the unexpected parent of platitude. It is the mind at ease that has leisure to sharpen the epigram and fire the *bon-mot*, and nothing can be more banal than the short phrases exchanged between the young pair whom the departure of the Darcys has left quivering and tingling with a sense of each other's proximity.

"What capital children!"

"Yes, aren't they?"

"And she, the mother, is one of the best, isn't she?"

"Yes, she is."

A pause.

Lavinia can go no farther than this bald assent in praise of her chosen friend, for the oppression of shyness that crushes and gags her. It is of this metamorphosed, dressed, transformed man, passing so visibly out of the province of the nurse, despite his crutches and his pallor, that she feels a timidity

none the less overmastering for her knowledge of its senselessness. That he sees it, the uncertainty of the tone which utters what sounds like a reproach sufficiently proves.

"Why were you so unwilling to own that you knew my Christian names? It was not a very compromising admission."

"Not very," she answers with a wavering laugh; "but to-day I feel as if I must sit up, and 'make strange' with you. The person I knew lay meekly flat on his back, and did not dare to call his soul his own; when he sits up and gives a party, I realize that my jurisdiction has ended."

"Has it?"

The question is followed by a silence so full of electricity that both feel the necessity of running up a lightning conductor. Both begin a sentence at the same moment, and each breaks it off on realizing the other's intention. Each begs the other to continue the interrupted phrase, and each asseverates that it was not worth ending. It is Binning who is finally persuaded to reissue from his mint the coin whose valuelessness he has spent so much breath in asserting.

"I was only going to say that if I have already become such a bogey—so unrecognizable—when once I am on my legs again, I shall have to be formally reintroduced to you."

"It will not be worth while." Even as she makes it Lavinia realizes the folly of her speech, opening up, as it does, the subject of their fast-approaching separation; but before her forces can

come up to relieve it, the traitor within her has rushed the position, and once again the electric current runs perilously strong.

* * * * *

As the young Darcys have always been taught to say what they mean, and mean what they say, they credit their acquaintance with a like simplicity and veracity ; and, having been invited by Captain Binning to come again soon, and bring the Siege Train, see no reason why they should not repeat their visit in compliance with a request, whose sincerity it never occurs to them to doubt, with the least possible delay. Thanks to the drag placed upon their ardour by a discreeter parent, a decent interval of three or four days is allowed to elapse before they reappear in triumph, equipped with all the munitions of war.

“You will find him in the garden,” Mrs. Prince says to her young visitors, waving her *en tout cas* in the direction indicated—“there among those lilacs. He is out for the first time in a wheeled chair—quite an event for him, poor lad !” Then, as they fly off in eager obedience to the direction given, she adds, *sotto voce*, to Mrs. Darcy, “If you could give them—Binning and Lavinia, I mean—a hint to stay within range of Féo’s windows. She likes to be able to watch them.”

But the rector’s wife must have forgotten to fulfil the delicate commission entrusted to her, since when, an hour later, Mrs. Prince joins the party, ostensibly to see on her own account how they are getting on, but in reality irefully despatched

by her daughter to investigate the causes of their being completely out of sight, she finds them all grouped in a fragrant close of blossoming shrubs round the wheeled chair, whence Binning is conducting the Relief of Ladysmith. That the carrying out of that operation has reduced all the forces engaged—male and female, grown-up people and children—to the same level of excited juvenility, is proved by the fact that, at the moment of Mrs. Prince's advent, Captain Binning and Miss Carew are contesting, with raised voices and heightened colours, the possession of the one cannon that shoots silver *bonbons*. For the moment they have entirely lost sight of their own dangerously tender relations to each other, and are disputing in real anger about the possession of a ridiculous toy.

"You have come just in time to prevent manslaughter," says Mrs. Darcy, rising from her knees with a humorously shamefaced air. "We had to shelter here from the wind," she adds in rather guilty explanation. "I think we are going to have another cold snap."

Either the "cold snap" alluded to, or one brought by Mrs. Prince herself, presently disperses the party, and the Darcys retreat with such precipitation as to leave the object of strife behind them on the grass.

Lavinia picks it up and eyes it unseeingly, conscious only that the voluble chaperonage of the last hour is withdrawn, and that in the green privacy of their lilac-scented bower nothing is left to protect them from each other. It will be for only a minute

or two that the delicious awkwardness of their first *tête-à-tête* amid the glad May greenness of trees, and the erotic suggestions of wedded blackbirds will last—only till the servant who drew the chair to its present harbour can be recalled and instructed to drag it up and down along the broad terrace walk between the sundial and the fountain, in the bald publicity of all the house's front windows, and within range of the still bedded Féodorovna's eye.

"I withdraw my claim," Binning says magnanimously, with a half-laugh.

"So do I!" rejoins she, relieved.

"Let it be neither mine nor thine, but divide it!"

"And to think that we should have been within an inch of a serious quarrel over *such* an object!" she cries, tossing the gem of the Rectory Siege Train disdainfully away. "Our first quarrel!"

At that—the phrase seeming ill pitched on and suggestive, both lapse into awkwardness, out of which, and also out of their bird-haunted brake, a footman presently expels them, lugging the one and compelling the other, since she is still on duty, into the stare of the afternoon sun on the shadeless terrace, which, or Mrs. Darcy's "cold snap," soon tires the invalid so much that he asks to be taken indoors.

He revives before long, however, when comfortably extended on his sofa, and removed from the heady influences of the lilac perfume and the blackbirds' song—three amorous cocks apparently courting one hen—he and his companion have settled down

into the at all events surface peacefulness of their normal relation of nurse and patient. She has proposed reading aloud to him, and, though he has not accepted the offer with much eagerness, being no great bookman, and, like most men, disliking having his reading done for him, she persists, contrary to her usual gentle habit of following his every suggestion, and guessing every unuttered wish. After all, the manoeuvre has its advantages, and he lies resigned, exploring the chart of her dear face, and making several new and delightful little discoveries.

An interruption soon occurs in the shape of a letter for Lavinia—arrived by the afternoon post, overlooked in passing through the hall, and now brought her by a servant. Her colour changes as she recognizes the handwriting. There must be something very wrong in her "State of Denmark," as she has time to realize in a flash of compunction, for her to feel as she does, that there is an indecency in her reading a letter from Rupert under Binning's eyes. Yet she must read it at once, too, since the fact of his writing implies something unusual, as he and his father are to return to-morrow morning, and she has never encouraged nor he permitted himself love-letters written only for love's sake. Asking leave of her companion, formally yet with hurried uneasiness she opens and reads the missive, seen at the first glance to be unaccountably long. The man, to put her at ease and make her feel free from observation, picks up the dropped volume ; but over its top, or through its boards—since such

little miracles are of easy performance to that most bogus of blind beggars, god Eros—he sees that, whatever her news may be, it is of an oversetting nature.

“They are not coming home to-morrow.”

This cannot be what has upset her. There must be something more.

“Has the baptismal register not turned up yet?”

“Yes, it was found on Thursday in St. Mary Abbots.”

He must wait her time.

“My uncle is laid up ill in London.”

“Gout?”

“Yes; but not simple gout. He felt an attack coming on, and dosed himself with the very strong remedies which the doctor has always forbidden him; got a chill on the top of that; and now he has driven it in.”

“And has sent for you to nurse him?”

“No; he will not hear of it.”

She shuts herself up into her letter, and he gets nothing more out of her for a while. She has even moved quite away from him to a distant window; still with that odd sense of immodesty in reading it while his eyes are upon her.

“I know what your impulse will be,” Rupert writes; “but you must resist it. It is not a *façon de parler*; but he would be seriously annoyed by your coming up. It seems difficult to believe it, knowing as we have done all our lives his absolute carelessness about money; but it is, nevertheless,

true that of late his one idea has been to screw and pinch in every possible way for——”

The “for” is carefully erased ; and the object of Sir George’s parsimonies left unstated ; but had it been printed on a poster in letters six feet high, Lavinia could not have read more clearly that it is for those terrible unescapeable younger children of hers that Sir George is lopping his little luxuries.

“The thought that your presence would swell the bill at this ‘d——d pot-house’ as he calls it, would do more to retard his cure than even your ministrations could counteract ; so stay where you are, and look after Binning, to whom please give my love. You know that among the many feminine graces for which you despise me, the gift of nursing is not the least !”

Then follows a postscript : “The poor old fellow caught his chill walking with me through yesterday’s storm, to save the expense of a cab or bus to a jeweller’s in the City, about an enamelled girdle he is having made for you ; and which I have been helping him to design. Now that it is too late, he is unnaturally good and obedient—a state of things I hope to maintain by encouraging the terror under which he labours of not being well by the 28th.”

Such was certainly not Rupert Champion’s intention in writing this letter, yet the impression derived from it by his *fiancée* is that never were so many unpleasant facts and suggestions crowded into four sides of a sheet of note-paper. Her uncle is seriously ill, and she is not to be allowed to go to him because he is saving all his money for her and Rupert’s younger

children. He has contracted his illness in the quest of an expensive ornament for her, which will add one more link to the enormous chain of obligations which is tying up her liberty with ever tighter and tighter knots. Rupert has given an added proof of his hopelessly unmanly tastes by designing the jewel. In a dreadful flash of prophetic insight, she sees him, in the terrible matter-of-fact freedom of married life, sitting with his arm round her waist, and quoting Waller—

“That which her slender waist confined
Shall now my joyful temples bind.”

He has sent his “love” with school-girl effusiveness to Binning; and, last and worst offence, he has alluded to the 28th!

For some moments the girl stands looking vaguely out at the rhododendron belts and azalea beds, the lawns and *parterres*, with a horrible feeling of hatred and physical nausea towards the man with whom she is to pass her life. Then the horror is transferred to herself, and strong reaction follows. She thrusts the letter into her pocket, goes back to her former seat, and picks up the book. Her action seems to forbid question or intrusion. But in a moment or two she lays down the volume, and makes her expiation. It does not look like one at first.

“Do not you think that complete unselfishness is the highest as well as the rarest quality that a man can possess?”

He is so much taken aback by the triteness and

apparent irrelevance of the question, that she is able to enlarge uninterrupted upon her dog's-eared theme.

"I mean do not you think that it is to be set far above generosity, or endurance, or courage, or any of that sort of showy virtues?"

"Are they showy?"

"They get a great deal more *kudos*, at any rate!" she retorts, with a heat he does not understand.

"Do not you agree with me?"

"I do not think I ever thought about it," he answers bluntly. "If I had, I should have taken for granted that unselfishness included all the others."

"How?"

"Well, take pluck for instance. If a man were perfectly unselfish, he would never cast a thought to his own skin."

"I do not at all agree with you," rejoins she, almost rudely. "There is no relation whatever between them: the one is the loftiest of moral qualities; the other is purely physical, a mere matter of nerves and muscles, and beef and beer."

He lies looking at her in puzzled pain, jaded with the effort to follow the windings of her inexplicable mood.

"You will wonder what is the motive of this flat tirade," she says with a laugh that has neither mirth nor music in it. "I must explain that I have had one more proof that Rupert is the most selfless being God ever created."

Binning takes the wind out of her sails. "He gave me that impression;" and the only net result of the expiation is to put them both out of spirits and temper for the rest of the evening.

CHAPTER XV

THE 28th of May has come, and the inevitable has happened. This inevitable is not that Lavinia Carew has become Lavinia Campion. On the contrary, her wedding stands postponed for a week, viz. to the 4th of June. The delay is in no degree attributable to her, but is caused by the illness of that uncle whose over-haste to be well, and determination to treat serious sickness with that high hand which it will never endure, has landed him in the same morass as it had done Féodorovna. With a reluctance proportioned to his extravagant eagerness for the object in view, with many racy expressions, and a refreshing shower of renewed insults, both wholesale and retail, distilling upon his patient son, Sir George has had to acquiesce in the deferring for an additional eight days of the attainment of his heart's desire.

Perhaps the inevitable might have been avoided if one of several things had happened or not happened. If Sir George had yielded to his niece's earnest entreaties to be allowed to nurse him, instead of insisting on her confining herself to a couple of runs up to London, each of so few hours' duration as to involve no swelling of the reckoning at the "d——d

pot-house ; " if Rupert had not been kept or kept himself in such close attendance on his father as to have no time to see how ill his own affairs were faring ; if Féodorovna had been permitted to complete her cure, and exercise momentarily supervision over her captive at home, instead of being despatched to Brighton—metaphorically kicking and screaming, it is true—but still despatched by a determined doctor and a for once unbullyable father ; if Binning's name had not appeared among the list of officers upon whom the Queen was pleased to bestow the Victoria Cross ; if Mafeking had not been relieved ! If, if ! the convenient, curtsying, carneying preposition, which has salved every malefactor's conscience since the world began ! For the malefactor in question it is but a very imperfect unguent, desperate as is the perseverance with which she uses it.

If, if, if ! A whole procession of them pass before her in the wakeful silence of the night ; and she gives herself the full benefit of them all. But at every morning watch, what a traitor she stands at her own bar ! To have taken advantage of " her men's " absence—the very phrase, lifelong in its employment, seems to reek of hypocrisy—to have taken advantage of their absence, of the heavy sickness of the one, and the selfless devotion of the other, to play them this coward's trick ! Yet her infidelity has only been of the soul, not of the body. Complete as has been and is the unfaithfulness to Rupert of her heart and pulses, up to the 28th of May there has been no physical contact between her and Binning beyond that one grateful touch of a sick man's lips

upon his nurse's hand, at which not the most monopolizing of lovers could carp. When her self-contempt grows unendurable, she drags this creditable fact of outward propriety to the front, pushing it before her, and hiding behind it at Conscience's judgment-seat.

And she *has* struggled ! What means has she not used ? what cruel, branding, searing remedies has not she tried—even to that extremest one of belittling, in her *for intérieur*, him whom her whole aching soul and racing blood call out upon as her only lord and love ? Has not she haled to the foreground and set in malicious order his deficiencies ? told herself to what a common type he belongs—just the yea and nay, straight, unintellectual Anglo-Saxon fighting man ? his character, how inferior in interest and complexity to Rupert's ; his mind, how much less subtle ; his apprehension, how much less quick ; his understanding of herself, how infinitely inferior ? And having quite demolished him, having left him scarcely comely and barely brave, she falls on his neck in the secretest recesses of her inveterately guilty heart, and begs his pardon with tears. It is not because he is a hero or a dunce that she loves him. It is for the reason which was already very old when Montaigne penned it : “*Parce que c'était, moi ! Parce que c'était, lui !*”

By the date of the Relief of Mafeking, Binning is able to get about a little with a stick, and even to assist with his presence and advice at the bonfire which, by “kind permission of Mr. and Mrs. Prince,” has had its site transferred, for his special benefit by its builders, the young Darcys, from

their own stable-yard to the ampler area of the Chestnuts. Not that the Rectory does not blaze too with subsidiary flames, and breaks out into a forest of flags that makes the bunting which had celebrated Ladysmith sink into insignificance. It would seem impossible that anything could carry the patriotic elation of the clergyman's family to a higher pitch than it has already reached, yet it is sensibly heightened by the providential coincidence, of which the poultry-yard is the scene, viz. that it is Baden Powell who brings out thirteen chickens on the very day of the raising of the siege. The fact is the more remarkable as two other generals, who were set upon the same day, but were wanting in the patient assiduity of B. P., produced nothing but addled eggs. It is not the Mafeking news, soul-stirring and spirit-lifting as it is, which has produced the inevitable. There is a safe publicity and generality in the emotion it evokes ; and Lavinia, hurling billets of wood on to the bonfire, and being exhorted, directed, and scolded by Binning, leaning on the top of his staff, which he ultimately, in the excitement of the moment, throws in too, is in far less peril than Lavinia chokingly reading aloud to its recipient the little paragraph which announces that he is among those to whom the Victoria Cross is to be awarded. She struggles through the small *naked* record of his achievement.

“Captain Binning, —th^e Hussars, who was in command of a troop, held an important position for some time against heavy odds ; and when compelled to retire, saw all his men into safety, and

then, though he had himself been wounded in the left lung, supported Lieutenant Henley, who was unable to walk, until the latter was again hit and apparently killed, Captain Binning being himself again dangerously wounded a short time after."

At the end, her hand goes out to clasp his as naturally as a man-comrade's would have done.

"For the first time I know how it happened! You never would tell me!"

During a minute or two he can only answer her by a hand-grip, whose vigour argues a recovered hold upon life and manhood; then—

"It is a great surprise," he says, not very steadily. "I did not even know that I had been recommended for it."

"Do not say that you are not glad!" she cries, with a high unnatural laugh, which, in her normal state, she would have repudiated as neurotic. "Do not say that Tom, Dick, and Harry deserved it better!"

As she looks at him in triumphant challenging prohibition, at his face, still that of one stunned by the shock of a so great and honourable joy, a thin image of Rupert seems to pass vapourishly between them—not of Rupert the admirable son, the delicate reticent lover, the perfectly comprehending friend, but of Rupert in white effeminacy, paling at the mere memory of a jibbing horse. Yet the Victoria Cross is no more answerable than Mafeking and her bonfire for the happening of the inevitable. That is ironically reserved for the 28th, the day on which Lavinia was to have been married

to Rupert. If it could have been staved off for twenty-four hours, it would never have happened ; since on the 29th Binning is to depart for Southampton to join the s.s. *Nubia*, which is taking out to the Cape drafts for half a dozen regiments already depleted by the enteric and the Boer.

The day has dawned with a splendour as ironical as all else belonging to it. Lavinia is no longer at the Chestnuts, where her services have ceased to be required, and whither Féodorovna has returned, fully recovered and wholly hysterical, to see the last of her ex-patient.

The Rectory children are all more or less bunged with tears, against which they bravely contend, and have eluded Miss Brine, and the inadequate consolation offered by her, that after all Captain Binning is no blood relation, and that six weeks ago they had never seen him, to seek the more perfect sympathy of "Lavy." But "Lavy" is not so nice as usual ; and though they find her wandering about her garden with no apparent occupation, she shows so little desire to hear or reciprocate their lamentations that they leave her in puzzled disappointment. Their mother, presently missing them, divining and disapproving their design, hastens after them ; and finding them hanging, with only very partially recovered spirits, over that unexpected tit's nest in the disused watering-can, which their jealous care has watched over since earliest eggdom, gravely dismisses them, and joins her friend.

Without speaking, the rector's wife directs her own steps and those of a companion who seems

scarcely to know, and not at all to care, where she is or what is being done with her, to the walled seclusion of the kitchen garden, as being less open to observation than the sloping lawn before the house. Yet at first the precaution seems unnecessary. There is nothing for any prying eye to see, nor ear to hear.

"Sir George and Rupert come back to-day?"

"No; to-morrow."

"Will the workmen be out of the house?"

"Not quite."

Silence; apparently numb on the one side; certainly self-reproachful on the other.

"What could have possessed me," Mrs. Darcy asks herself, "to allude to the papering and painting of the nurseries?"

Lavinia remains absolutely dumb. A despair so lifeless and inarticulate frightens the elder woman; and, after a minute or two of anxious cogitation, she tries the effect of a douche of cold water on her companion's apparently swooned soul.

"I did not think you would have collapsed like this!"

It is partially successful. "I have not collapsed. Since you *know*, having dragged it out of me, there is no need to pretend before you; but when it matters, I shall not collapse."

"He is coming to bid you good-bye to-day?"

"Yes."

"Is—is that wise?"

"I don't know, and I don't care."

There is such a dull doggedness in the tone,

such a clutch upon the interview referred to implied in it, that Mrs. Darcy gives a gasp.

"It won't be good-bye!" she says presently, in a low tone of conviction—"it *cannot* be!"

Lavinia does not answer; not in the least, as her friend is distressfully aware, because she is acquiescent; but simply because the statement is not worth contradicting.

"I can't stand by and see a crime committed!" Susan says, talking low and very quickly, and trying not to let her agitation get the better of her. "If you feel that it is a task beyond your strength, I will speak to Rupert for you; at the least hint, the least suggestion—heroically unselfish as he is."

"You used not to admire him so much!" puts in the other with a bitter dryness.

"It is quite true, and it is perfectly fair that you should remind me of it," rejoins Mrs. Darcy, humbly and ruefully; far too intent on her object to resent or even notice any blow that her self-esteem may suffer on the way to it. "I was paltry enough to allow myself to be blinded by his silly little foibles to his great qualities; but of late, during Sir George's illness, realizing, as I have done—as every one must have done—all that he has had to give up, and with what perfect self-effacement he has done it——"

Lavinia breaks in upon her with a terrible jocosity.

"You have forgiven him his old lace and his Elzevirs! Well, better late than never!"

Her friend stares at her with aghast, wide-open

grey eyes, as of one who sees a hideous blighting transformation taking place in a dear and familiar object.

"You are right!" she says, under her breath. "I thought him completely unworthy of you, so unworthy that your loss would cause him very little pain so long as he could keep, as you say, his 'old lace and his Elzevirs;' while in another direction I saw, or thought I saw, a possibility——" Her voice dies falteringly away.

Lavinia looks at her stoically. "You need not distress yourself; you have neither made nor marred in the matter."

Another grim silence.

"Will you empower me to tell Rupert?"

"Tell him what?"

"Will you tell him yourself?"

"Tell him what? There is nothing to tell."

The rector's wife pauses, brought up against this wall of senseless brazen denial; her thin sensitive face even whiter than its white wont; but she is not easily baffled, nor apt to abandon a task because it wrings her withers.

"My dear," she says, taking gently hold of the girl's coldly pendant hand, and using an endearment uncommon to her, being one sparing of banal caresses, "do you think that you are doing Rupert a kindness in providing him with a wife who avoids his look, winces at his voice, and shudders at his touch?"

"What the eye does not see, the heart does not feel. He will never know!" There is a wretched

callousness in her voice, whose counterfeitness a slight shiver betrays.

"Not know ! Rupert not know !"

The words, and the inflection that accompanies them, bring home to Lavinia the fact, on which she has often laughingly expatiated to her friend, of the extraordinary intuitive knowledge of her possessed by Rupert ; of her absolute inability to keep one half-thought or fancy from his ken. That he should so turn over and handle the innocent trivialities of her mind and heart, has formerly been a matter of jest. Now the thought that there will be no secret place in her soul into which she can retire from him with her terrible secret, no gourd under whose shade she can sit hugging her misery undetected, breaks down the fortification of her numbness, and leaves the breach open for active conscious agony to march up and take possession. She draws her cold fingers from Mrs. Darcy's pitying clasp, and turns upon her.

"I do not know what object you propose to yourself by putting me to this torture !" she says. "I think a person should be fully in possession of the facts of a case before she ventures to give an opinion upon it."

"That is quite true," replies the other, gently, too full of deep compassion for the writhing soul before her to resent either the tone or the words used ; "but does it apply to me ?"

"Yes," replies Lavinia, her insensibility seeming to give way to a far more distressing and unnatural access of wild discourtesy ; "yes, a hundred times

yes! You have undertaken the management of my affairs without in the least understanding them. If I were to take your advice, if I were to jilt Rupert as you so shamefully suggest to me, how much the better should I be? how much the nearer——?” She stops dead short, unable to name that never-to-be-reached goal.

“What do you mean?”

“What do I mean?” speaking very slowly. “I should have thought that it did not need a conjurer to discover that! I mean that *I* am not the only person you would have to convince!”

“*What?*”

“Has it never occurred to you that there may be an obstacle on *his* side too?” (It is plain that the possessive pronoun here does not refer to Rupert.)

“No,” breathlessly.

“Don’t you think——?”

In the determination to master a tongue restive to such utterance, Lavinia pronounces her words with a clear incisiveness that, even at this crucial moment, makes Mrs. Darcy gauge apprehensively the distance that parts the tragedy in which she is taking part from the tranquil prose of the gardener potting cuttings under a shed.

“Don’t you think it might strike Captain Binning that he has done them almost enough harm already?”

“Don’t speak quite so loud!” in quick-breathing entreaty. “You mean about Bill?”

“Mightn’t it occur to him that, having robbed

them of Bill, it would not be behaving very handsomely to rob them of me too?"

The rector's wife shakes her head mournfully. "Isn't it a little late to think of that? He has done that already!"

"What has he done?" asks Lavinia, standing at bay, with a fierce white face of dogged championship. "What do you lay to his charge? Once he kissed my hand,—it was *this* one," smiting it with the fore finger of the other; "but it was only to thank me for nursing him. That was his one crime! That was all he has ever done—all he ever will do!" In her breaking voice, in her passion-pinched face, there is but little attempt to disguise the poignancy of the smart that the belief in that reticence brings with it.

"Not even if he comes to bid you good-bye?"

Lavinia's eyes, awhile ago so dead, light up ominously.

"You think that I ought not to let him come?" she asks between two panting breaths.

"I do."

"That it would be wiser in me not to see him again?"

"Yes."

Lavinia throws out her hands with a gesture of reckless defiance.

"Then I will be *unwise*!"

CHAPTER XVI

"Jesu, defend me ; for then I rewarded your father and your brother right evil for their great goodness."

It is not long before Miss Carew has the opportunity either to put into execution or repent of the intention announced by her ; for scarcely has Mrs. Darcy turned her back upon the scene of her failure, in crestfallen but quite unresentful sadness, before the successor whose coming she had deprecated is announced. Lavinia has let her friend go without any expression of apology or regret, and has watched her depressed slight back disappearing through the churchyard without one feeling but a vague sense of relief that she is out of the way.

It takes all the self-control with which the rector's wife is so plentifully endowed, to enable her to receive, with the proper amount of concern, the news, which reaches her when scarcely within the Rectory gate, that Baden Powell has done to death two of his Mafeking chickens, by the simple process of putting his large yellow foot upon them, and keeping it there in serene unconsciousness of their departing squeaks. Her *rôle* is rendered easier by the fact that the children's own grief at the catastrophe is much less than it would have been

on any other day in the year, being merged in the far acuter one of their hero-playmate's departure. There is nothing very heroic in the utterance with which their idol is answering the mute look which is the only greeting Lavinia can control herself into offering him.

"Am I a greater scarecrow than you expected in this coat? I was told by a man I met in Pall Mall on Tuesday that I looked like a clothes-peg! Well, one might easily look like a worse thing; and, thank God, I never had much superfluous flesh!"

It is clear that he scarcely knows what he is saying; and that, though his speech is perfectly rational in its triviality, it is so more by instinct and habit than by any conscious command over tongue or thought.

"The doctors passed you?" she asks, squeezing out the words with a parsimony that proves how little trust she, for her part, can place in her organ of utterance.

"Yes; they said that the voyage would finish setting me up. So it will."

The last clause is, as the girl feels, a reassurance addressed to the grudging doubt and negation in her eyes—the eyes that verify how loosely the clothes hang on a frame that betrays the fact more plainly than a less largely built one would have done. How easily, how reasonably, how nothing more than humanly, they—that callous Medical Board—might have sent him back—so little more than half-cured as he is—for another fortnight, another week!

Another week ! yes ; that he might be here to dance at her wedding !

"So this is your home ! This is where you have spent your life !" Binning says, looking round at the room seen for the first and last time, and in which, in fancy, he will have to set her beside the armchair that he divines to be Sir George's.

He pauses, not for the moment quite equal to bear placing, even in imagination, the *jeune ménage*. Yet he will not spare himself the pain of knowing what corner of the fragrant homely room, that bears the imprint of her and her tastes and occupations, will shelter the warm domestic nearness to each other of husband and wife.

"Tell me where you all sit, that, when I am gone, I may picture you."

"That is Uncle George's chair," she says, pointing to the one that the young man had rightly assigned to the house's master ; and then stops.

"And Rupert's ?"

"Rupert has no particular chair." After a moment, "Rupert always chooses whatever seat he thinks no one else wants ; that is Rupert's theory of life—and his practice."

The tribute seems wrung out of her ; yet she makes it, and handsomely too.

He gives a little nod of acquiescence, inwardly shocked at his own want of generosity in being able to do no more, yet—inwardly also—writhing at her praise.

"And you have lived here always ?"

"Yes, always ; that is, ever since Uncle George

picked me out of the gutter." She gives a forced laugh, and goes on, "You know that when I was a destitute baby he saved me from the workhouse?"

"Yes, you told me."

"Your tone says that I have repeated it *ad nauseam*. Well, I have to do it, lest—though you would hardly think such a thing possible—I may forget it. I am very near doing it sometimes."

"I do not believe it."

There is a grit and manliness in his voice that almost contradicts the passion in his eyes—eyes in which, for all their passion, there is room too for a wondering consternation at the metamorphosis wrought in his sweet, calm nurse and comrade.

"Shall we go out of doors?" he asks, after a moment or two of burdensome silence. "We have had so few hours out of doors together."

She reads his thought. They will be safer—safer from themselves and from each other—out of doors. It had been her own, and she is almost sure that she had meant to act in accordance with it; yet that it should come from him causes her a dull surprise, painful through all its dulness.

"Where would you like to go?" she asks, when they stand together on the garden sward facing the familiar view, the distance clearly azure-blue to-day, but over which, as she has so often triumphantly explained to visitors, a grey mist is apt to lie while her upland is in radiant sunshine. To-day the cases are reversed. Sunshine bathes the distance; it is on her heart that the fog lies thick. "Where would

you like to go?" she repeats. "To the Rectory, to bid good-bye to the children?"

It is out-Heroding Herod to suggest that their last hour shall be spent in company, and her heart stands still until his answer comes. If it is an assent, all danger will be over, and of that she ought to be glad. But it is not.

"Show me some pleasant walk where you often go."

The motive which dictates the request is the same that had made him ask which chair she is wont to occupy in the drawing-room? He is collecting frames for the gallery of pictures of her that is to hang in his heart.

She gives a slight assenting nod, and sets off with an undecided step, turning over in her mind, with a view to choosing it, which of her familiar paths is the one that is least associated with Rupert's companionship. It is safe, at all events, to begin with the churchyard. Every new-comer is shown the gigantic brother yews, and told how much is the eight-century girth of the largest one.

"It measures thirty-four feet in circumference," she says, in a dull show-woman's voice, as she has said scores of times before to politely astonished visitors.

And then they stand silent, staring at the erebus of shade above their heads, at the enormous branch which, in some former storm—now itself long ago—has shown symptoms of breaking away from the colossal trunk, and has taken such a gigantic prop to support it. From under the eternal night of the

tree, day is seen to laugh over the rather neglected green mounds around—neglected as rural churchyards are discredibly often apt to be, but over which the kindly wild flowers are waving unbidden.

“If you outlive me, which is unlikely, this is where you may finally think of me,” says Lavinia, speaking at last. “It is not very imaginative of one to live and die on the same quarter of an acre, is it? The entrance to our vault is on the other side of the church.” She gives her piece of information with a sort of alacrity, in contrast to the muffled dulness of her last sentences.

“You say it as if you were telling me a piece of good news.”

“You wished to know where I generally sit and walk. I thought you might carry your interest a step further, and like to know where I am to lie.”

He turns aside, as if to examine one of the chipped truisms on a lichened headstone; but not before she has seen a glimpse, and divined the rest, of the disfigurement her cruel and unworthy appeal to his pity has worked on his still sickness-thinned and hollowed face. A bitter pang of self-condemnation adds itself to a mocking memory of one, and the most emphatic, of Féodorovna’s nursing injunctions—to be sure not to mention any subject in the least painful to her patient. Is this the way in which she is fulfilling it? He is trying his hardest to behave like an honourable gentleman; and instead of helping him, she is—because it gives herself some relief from her intolerable pain—setting the stumbling-block of her cowardly bid for

compassion in his way. She half puts out her hand to touch the sleeve which still bags upon his arm ; then draws it back.

"I have thought of a walk," she says, in a better and braver voice.

Up a steep cart-track, skirting a hop-garden, where the soaring poles and lofty roof of inter-twisted network tell of the faith that the now infant plants, scarcely beginning to clasp their supports, will presently engreen the whole land ; then down one of its naked aisles ; across two cheerful meadows, where strong lambs are capering among the butter-cups ; to a gate that gives entrance to a brake, in whose midst an inconspicuous pool half hides itself and its water-hens. Lavinia pauses, with her hand on the top bar, and an expression of doubt in her face. The place looks more solitary than its wont. Will he think that she has betrayed him into an ambush even more dangerous than that of the house—he, between whom and herself, all along climbing upland, and through sunny pasture, the dead Bill and his living kinsmen have seemed almost visibly to walk ?

"It is scarcely a wood," she says hesitatingly. "There is not a tree of more than twenty years' growth, and the nightingales sing so loudly here that they will save us the trouble of talking."

His answer is to give the gate an unsuccessful push.

"It is locked."

"That is very unusual," she answers, for an instant harbouring and at once angrily dismissing

from her mind a superstitious idea that the homely obstacle may be Balaam's winged prohibitory angel in a different dress. "It is almost always open ; but nothing is easier than to climb it."

He swings himself obediently over, and stands on the other side to give her his aid. But she motions him away, crying almost repellantly—

"Go on ! go on ! I do not need any help."

If he receives her into his arms, even in the mechanical and prosaic civility of assisting her to bestride a five-barred gate, she knows that were ten thousand dead Bills and living Ruperts to interpose their pale prohibitions, the inevitable must happen.

Lavinia has spoken accurately. The pleasant spot in which their agility has landed her and her companion is not a wood. It is merely one of those low green tangles of hazel and maybush, sapling chestnut, and gnarly willow, whose woof is nowhere too thick to let in a thrifty shower of temperate sunbeams ; and through the woof of whose carpet the blue hyacinth dye runs dim and rich. A path not wide enough to admit of any couple save a lover-pair walking abreast, girdles the little sheet of water at quiet play with its dancing flies and leaping fish and placidly oaring moorhens. From the heart of one of those brakes, whose semi-privacy seems to provoke the nightingale to uttermost extremity of song, one is now turning his whole little brown body, dimly seen sitting on a hawthorn bough, into a shout of heavenly self-congratulation upon finding himself in such a beautiful May world,

and with a demand for love too exquisitely worded to be denied.

Arrived at the pool-side, within a few yards of him, the human couple, of whom he is so much too joyful to be the little spokesman, stand quite still, in fear of scaring him ; but in his happy little heart there is no room for fear, and from the look of the poor souls he knows that they are not enemies.

"I told you that he would save us the trouble of talking," says Lavinia under her breath.

He has saved the lesser singers of his own genus the same trouble, apparently ; for whether quelled or entranced, or learning those imitations which they will afterwards practise with clever inferiority, they are dumb.

Lavinia listens at first with a sense of relief. The divine organ that lies in that little parcel of feathers is uttering all the longings, all the merging of two into one, all the fruition-nearing desires to which she may never, never give voice. To the deceit of that seeming relief succeeds an intolerable revolt. Why should she of all creation alone be silent ? Why should not she for once speak out ? Why, since this little island of time upon which they stand is their very own, since they have no future, since they have been ironically given this one half-hour to show them what life might have been,—why should not they be wise, and, pushing aside those dim ghosts which they themselves have quixotically interposed between the aching reality of their own bruised hearts, slake their terrible thirst for each other in one first and last draught ?

The temptation to throw herself upon his breast is so strong, that to her dazed senses she almost seems to herself to have already yielded to it, though in effect she has only stood in pale maidenliness at his side ; but the illusion is so vivid, and the reactionary shock of horror at herself so potent, that she walks with unsteady haste away from her companion towards the singer, whom her movement puts to flight.

"You have frightened him away !" says the young man, standing still on the path.

"Yes ; I am glad."

"*Glad !* That is not a word that one seems to have much use for just now !"

His tone tells her that the temptation is strong upon him too, and his action, in adding two or three more yards to those she has already set between them, that in deadly struggle he is grappling with it. If she were his true love, would not she come to his aid ? With a prodigious effort she clears the red mist from before her eyes, and steadies the trembling in her traitorous hands. Then, rejoining him, and beginning to resume the walk that their charmed ears had first interrupted, she says, in a tone to whose cheerfulness she tries with all the force of her will-power not to give a hysterical ring—

"After all, there is a good deal to be glad of, if one comes to think of it—your recovery, your Victoria Cross——"

"Yes," indistinctly ; but with an effort, whose suffering manliness she recognizes, to follow her lead—"yes ; I am a sweep to complain !"

It nerves her to new effort. "Was not Féodorovna very much excited at your getting it?" her terror of herself driving her on into a torrent of trivial questions. "How is Féodorovna? is she yellow still?"

"No; not at all."

"Is she quite herself again?—quite recovered?"

"She is supposed to be."

"But you think that she is not?"

"I think she is—rather—hysterical."

Lavinia's feverish trickle of inquiry drops into silence. Between the lines of his brief words, and in the constraint of his tone, she reads that the method adopted by Miss Prince to show her hysteria has been to throw herself into his arms, as she had done by letter into General ——'s, and has volunteered to follow him round the globe, as she had generously done in the case of his predecessor. Well, she herself has been within an ace of a similar action during the last five minutes. She ought, therefore, to feel a sympathy for the same abandonment on the part of another. And yet, although Miss Carew knows, as well as if she had been present at the drama, that Féodorovna has remained in Binning's arms not a moment longer than the space of time needed for him to find a chair in which to deposit her, yet a dizzying jealousy seizes her at the thought that, though only for a minute, and deeply against the will of the object of her amorous demonstration, Miss Prince has lain on that breast whose pulsing against her own Lavinia will never feel.

"*Hysterical!*" she repeats, after a pause, in a low key of suspicion. "Why was she hysterical? How did she show that she was hysterical?"

A slight flush, or so she fancies, passes over his hollow cheeks.

"Oh, I don't know. How do people usually show it?"—with impatient evasion.

"Laughing? Crying?"

"Yes, yes; that sort of thing!" Then, with an upbraiding accent, that escapes him against his will, "Why should we talk about her, poor soul?"

"Why not?" she answers. "What else is there to talk about? There is nothing else."

The words, extravagant as they are, represent to Lavinia the exact truth. *He! She!* There is nothing else in God's universe; and before both him and her stands the prohibitory angel, the flame of whose waved sword blinds them to all creation also. She looks straight before her in dogged despair, and a caught half-sobbing breath beside her tells her with what a strangling grip the temptation is taking him by the throat. Yet this time she puts out no finger, utters no wisely trivial commonplace to help him. The mental picture of Féodorovna clinging sobbing round his neck, even though she knows with what repellant grudgingness that embrace had been met, has robbed Lavinia of all further power of fight than what lies in silence. He does not leave her even that.

"We shall hear of each other indirectly, I suppose?" he says by-and-by, in a voice not the

clearer for the lump in his throat, which is clearly past his power to swallow.

Her cup of misery runs over. "No doubt," she answers with a shuddering distinctness. "If you ask Féodorovna, she will write you a long account of my wedding! She is a great letter-writer!"

As if the words possessed some paralyzing spell over their feet, both of them stop dead short; and, turning round, stare full in each other's faces, conversation shrivelling up its thin fabric in that fiery moment; and then—the inevitable happens. The gasping lips draw nearer, nearer, nearer; the idly hanging arms stretch themselves out, enfold, embrace, crush; and, with no apparent initiation on either side, Fate hurls them upon one another's forbidden breasts. Their kisses are frantic with the haste of six wasted weeks, and have their edge given by the knowledge that, for these sad two, there is only one little dreg at the bottom of the wine-cup of life and love, and that if they do not make haste to drain it, it will be poured out on the desert ground that is soaked with the lost vintages meant to appease the thirst of parched humanity.

They have thrust away the irksome apparition that had officiously flitted between them. For such a ghost's thin body there is no room between his heart and hers. Out of both those hearts all their former long-established, deep-rooted inhabitants are turned, driven by the flail of the one supreme scourge. In those hearts Honour had held her high court, Duty had wielded her sceptre, unselfish

Family Affection been warmly nested. Now, of none of them is there a trace left in either consciousness. For neither of them does anything exist but the omnipotent primal instinct—the instinct that drove the first man and woman into each other's throbbing arms.

It is not for long—not for more than a few moments—only for one kiss-length, that that mad, dumb, clinging oblivion endures. Then the old ejected law-givers begin to gather up their sceptres and return; boldly ejecting, in their turn, the furious rebel that had ousted them; and the two that God has not joined together stagger apart. As in the impulse of embrace neither was earlier or later than the other, so is the shock of disunion common and simultaneous. They find themselves standing apart, uncertainly staring at each other in the imperfect consciousness of an enormous joint crime. It was only a kiss—an utter, scorching, lover's kiss, it is true—yet still only a kiss that has so seared their re-awakening consciences; but had their disloyalty gone to the extremest pitch of unfaithfulness, it could hardly have branded them with a deeper sense of guilt. Her white lips frame three scarcely audible words, which he yet hears—“This—day—week!”—and he whispers, in horrified ejaculation, “Rupert! *Bill!*”

There is a terrible silence—at least, it seems so to them—though the nightingale, scarcely scared, and having taken but a short flight to the branch of a youngling chestnut, is finishing his epithalamium with even bettered music. The reinstated judges

have taken their seats, and are holding a dread assize.

"It is only I who am to blame!" says Lavinia, by-and-by, in a key a little above her former one. "*You* did really struggle. If I had helped you honestly, you would have pulled through; but I did not. I never really meant you to hold out! I see now that I meant it all along to happen! I meant you to kiss me! I thought—God forgive me!—that I should be able to bear my life better afterwards if you did!"

"If I had been honest," he says hoarsely, "shouldn't I have accepted your offer of taking me to the Rectory? You know you *did* offer. If I had meant honestly, should I have come *here*?" casting a glance of despairing reproach round at the blue and green and silver accessories to his fall—smiling water and curtsyng sedge and sky-coloured blue-bells.

"But *I* brought you here!" cries the other culprit, in a heart-rending eagerness, of which he will not suffer her to have the monopoly—to assume all the weight of their "most mutual" lapse.

"It was a pity that Bill did not leave the Boers to finish me!"

Then there is silence again. This time it is the man who breaks it, though his tone is so low as to constitute scarcely an infringement of the crushing guilty stillness.

"And you will still marry him this day week?"

At that she veils her face with both hands.

"What am I?" she says indistinctly, through the relief of their shield. "What have I become? I have lived for twenty-three years, and I never suspected that there was a bad woman inside me!"

"And for twenty-eight years I have imagined that I was a gentleman!"

CHAPTER XVII

“Even thus two friends condemned
Embrace and kiss and take a thousand leaves,
Loather a hundred times to part than die ;
Yet now farewell, and farewell Life with thee.”

THEY look at each other in a sort of terror, with a renewal and immense increase of that fear of their own and each others' possibilities of frailty, which, looked back upon now, is seen to have been so inadequately weak and so abundantly justified. Since there is no longer any barrier of innocence between them, what is there to hinder them from a repetition—a hundred repetitions—of that tasted, and therefore now senselessly abstained-from, ecstasy? What more of guilt can there be in ten or twenty score kisses than in that one which they have drunkenly given and taken? They see the sophistry dawning in one another's hungry eyes; and once again their rebel arms half reach out reciprocally across a dwindled interval; but this time, to balance her former misleading of him, salvation—if that bitter abstinence can be called so—comes from her that at first was weakest. She tears her eyes away from him, and snatches a look round, as in preparation for flight.

“We must not stay here any longer!” she says

with an accent of ungovernable fear ; and he as wildly acquiesces.

"No," he says ; "you are right. I do not know what has come to me ; but you are right not to trust me !"

"It is I, I, I!" she repeats in distraught self-accusation. "You do not understand what a monster I am ! I am to marry Rupert *next week* ! I have been engaged to him all my life ! I am all they possess in the world ! Since I was a week old my uncle has overwhelmed me with his generous love ; every one has said that I was more to him than even the boys. Now the one hope that is left for him lies——"

Her rapid flow of self-accusation breaks off abruptly, stemmed by the awful obstacle placed by memory in its torrent course ; and her face turns ghastly under his miserable eyes, as once more for the thousandth time, but with immeasurably deepened repulsion, she realizes the nature of the hope which is her uncle's one remaining tie to life, and by whom to be fulfilled. It is by bearing children to Rupert that her intolerably heavy debt to them both is to be paid. For one insane moment her look flies to the pool. It must be under the little circles that the dancing flies are making on its surface that she can best cut the knot that is so far past untying. The broken voice of her fellow-sinner and fellow-sufferer calls her back.

"And I ! Do you forget that it was through me they lost poor Bill ?" Possibly it is a relief to each to pile the chief weight of their common guilt on his and her own head respectively, in unconscious

contrast to the shabby recriminations of our first parents ; but of even this little alleviation they are soon robbed, all other consciousness merged in the killing sense of instant and eternal parting.

“ You had better stay here for a few minutes—till I am well away,” says Lavinia, speaking very fast, but not incoherently. After a little gasping pause, with a fresh rush of utter horror and woe, “ Must I tell Rupert ? ” Then, giving herself that answer of which her lover is quite incapable, “ No ! I must not ! if I did, it would be in the hope—the certainty that he would cast me off. No, no ; I must not—I must not tell him, whatever happens : it would never do to tell him.” She rambles on, half to herself, repeating the phrases, as of one whose hold on her own intelligence is slipping away ; then recovering it with a sudden snatch, she says brusquely, “ Well ! it is done, and it can’t be undone, and there is an end of it. Good-bye ! I—I would say ‘ God bless you ’ if I had any business to.”

Without giving him time for any answering benediction—as, indeed, why should he bless her ?—she breaks into a stumbling run, which carries her blindly on, till at the curve which will finally hide him from her sight, the curve whose distance from him guarantees her safety, the dully raging passion within her arrests her feet, and turns her head to see once more in crowning farewell torment the figure, in loosely hanging clothes, of him whom she has ironically helped back to life only to make him taste the sharpness of death.

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"But I told you to say that I was not at home to any one?"

"I did say so, 'm."

"It is not eleven o'clock yet?"

"No, 'm; it wants five minutes of eleven."

"I am too busy: I have too much to do. It is impossible that I should see any one this morning."

"So I told Miss Prince, 'm; but she said she was sure that you would see her."

"Miss Prince always says that."

"Yes, 'm."

There is sympathy in the assent of the elderly unsmart butler, who has reached the third stage in the usual progress of valuable servants to their goal—that progress marked by the successive milestones of "servant," "treasure," "tyrant," "pensioner;" for Féodorovna is not popular with his class.

"Will you go back and tell Miss Prince that I am very sorry, but I am afraid I must ask her to put off her call till to-morrow, as Sir George and Mr. Rupert are coming down by the 4.38 train, and I have a good many arrangements to make before they arrive?"

The old butler regards her with a respectful pity for the weakness of reasoning power that can imagine the visitor in question to be kept at bay by the means proposed.

"Yes, 'm; but I do not think it will be any use, for Miss Prince said she would like to take a turn in the garden until you were disengaged. And I beg your pardon, 'm—your eyes are better than mine—isn't that Miss Prince opening the iron gate?"

Of course it *is* Miss Prince—Miss Prince come to surprise Lavinia in her utter dishevelment of soul, though the habit of a lifetime keeps her unnerved body in its simple raiment neat and dainty—come to verify the staring facts that sleep has mocked her ; that hope has bid her an eternal good-bye ; that her despair is beyond the depth that any leaded line can plumb ; that she is wretched and guilty beyond the sin-and-sorrow compass of any woful malefactor since the world began ; come to spy and comment, before she has begun to make up spirit and flesh for that ghastly play-acting which is to last her life. These are the thoughts—if such mental *orts* and fragments can be called so—that knock against each other in a vertigo of fear in Miss Carew's brain, as her visitor, with a graceful flitting gait that has yet sufficiently proved the determination beneath it, floats up the kitchen-garden walk, that had yesterday witnessed poor Mrs. Darcy's discomfiture. Féodorovna is dressed in a delicate Court mourning, and a certain elevation of expression tells Lavinia that she has come to proclaim some action on her own part that to most persons it would appear more judicious to conceal.

“Gathering flowers ?” she says, with a chastened smile, and with no attempted apology for overriding her listener's efforts to elude her. “If I had only thought of it, I would have brought you any number from our Houses.” There is a touch of the comfortable maternal brag in the words, but it appears only to vanish as she adds with a quiet sigh, “As you may imagine, I had other things to think of !”

"Had you?"

Lavinia has scarcely interrupted her flower-cutting, since it enables her to present only a profile to her visitor's observation, and the reflection is passing through her mind with a foggy comfort that, since she has not shed one tear, there can be no swollen eyelids to give her away, and that, even if there were, Féodorovna's panoply of perfect egotism would protect her from the sight of them.

"*Had I?*" repeats Miss Prince, the suavity of her high sorrow touched by a ruffle of indignation. "Who can know that better than you?"

The shape of the question gives Lavinia an inward convulsion of new terror. Is it possible that she can have heard, or learnt, or divined?

"Do you mean that Captain Binning is gone?" she asks, bending over a long-stalked bronze tulip, which she snips off nearer the bulb than she would have done in a more rational moment.

"Yes; he is gone!" After a moment of reverent ruminating, "It went off quite quietly."

"Did it?"

"Our real farewell was yesterday. We had a very important interview yesterday morning. I asked for it."

"Did you?"

"As you know, I have never been tied by the conventions. I have always overridden them."

"Yes."

"In my case such unusual action is a necessary postulate of happiness. *You* are in the enviable position of knowing that you can never be loved for

anything but yourself; that no man can be accused of mercenariness in approaching you, but in *my* case there is always the danger that the millions with which I am credited should keep away from me any man of particularly delicate feeling and high honour."

It seems incredible to Lavinia that at such a moment she herself should be able to entertain so sordid a speculation; yet there is no doubt that the wonder flashes through her mind as to whether the profits of the Dropless Candle have really amounted to the figure so superbly indicated by the daughter and goddaughter of that great invention?

"Such being the case," continues Miss Prince, in a tone of modest pride at the about-to-be-related exploit, "there was only one course open to me, and as it was perfectly consonant with my views of life and ethics, I took it without reluctance. I offered myself to him."

"As you did to General — three months ago?"

The recalled action—recalled by the very white lips of the heroine's one hearer—would put most people out of countenance, and even Miss Prince's once more admirably white surface shows a pink stain.

"You speak as if you were convicting me of inconsistency—of infidelity to my ideal," she says, with a little haste of wronged modesty. "And superficially it may appear to be so; but it is only in appearance; as you know it has always been my creed that whenever and wherever I met what I

conceived to be the highest and noblest qualities of humanity embodied in one man, I ought to offer myself unreservedly to him. If I have failed, it is a failure more glorious than most successes."

Lavinia has stopped her flower-cutting, and forgotten her misgivings as to the tell-tale tragedy of her own face; she looks sullenly and with what she knows to be a baseless rage of jealousy at her, the manner and accompaniments of whose declaration of love she is in dull torment trying to reconstruct, while memory adds its sting by recalling to her the high, cool apartness of virginal indignation which had been her own attitude of mind towards Féodorovna's former achievement.

"Circumstances were against me," pursues Féodorovna, presently, looking away in a sort of dreamy protest towards the horizon. "That unlucky illness! If I had had *your* opportunities, the opportunities which were wasted on you, he might have decided differently."

It is lucky that Miss Prince is still upbraiding the skyline; for Lavinia gives a sudden wince at the allusion to that safely preoccupied heart of her own which has rendered her, as a matter of course, danger-proof. To defend herself against that passionate repudiation of her own immunity, which seems fighting its mad way to her lips, she frames a needless question.

"He refused you?"

Féodorovna bends the chastened elegance of her black-and-white toque in dignified acquiescence.

"Yes."

A stinging curiosity goads the other on to a second question—

“And you—how did you take it?”

“I told him how greatly I admired his disinterestedness,” replies Miss Prince, with perfectly regained equanimity, adding, with a touch of the hereditarily commercial spirit, shrewd even in adversity. “It would, of course, have been very advantageous for him from a material point of view.”

“And—and that was all? It ended there?”

To only the sharpened eye of jealous suspicion would the tiny hesitation that precedes the answer to this question be perceptible.

“Ye—es, it ended there.”

Past the power of even Féodorovna is it to confess to the precise method in which she had closed the interview; and Lavinia knows that she will never learn at what stage of the indubitably offered and as indubitably refused embrace—whether at that of mere intention or ripe accomplishment it had been arrested by its object. Féodorovna had given her last response without looking her questioner quite in the face, and her eye now rests on the church tower and the blossoming horse-chestnuts with a real, if exasperating, sadness in it.

“I told him if ever he reconsidered his decision, that whatever might be the lapse of time, whatever else changed, *I* should not.”

The unassuming fidelity that voice and words claim is clearly felt by their possessor to be so beautiful that Lavinia asks herself, in a topsy-turvy

whirl of confused wretchedness, whether it is not really so? but the thought—if it deserves such a name—is chased a few moments later, as with a whip of small cords, out of her soul by a far more smarting suggestion.

“Well, good-bye. I am going away this afternoon to a quiet little fishing village in Suffolk, to be quite alone with myself; so perhaps I shall not see you again till the wedding. But, after all, that is only six days off!”

CHAPTER XVIII

ONLY six days off! And the return of her "men" is only five hours off! Between these two dates how can any one be expected to keep their sanity? There would have been a better chance for her if Féodorovna had not come to stir the furnace of her misery into whitest heat, with the elegant drawing-room poker of her fatuous confession. Among preoccupations of such incomparably deeper gravity, it adds one more pang to Lavinia's horror of herself to find that the wonder whether or how nearly Miss Prince accomplished that embrace which Lavinia looks upon as a dastardly theft upon herself, keeps a foremost place in her mind. Yet meanwhile she goes machine-like through her preparations, attending with nice accuracy to every detail that forecasting affection could plan and execute for the comfort of a dear home-coming invalid. She even carries out a little surprise—devised a while, how miraculously little a while ago!—to lighten her uncle's sombre spirit, always specially inclined to fault-finding and depression after any small absence. And when it is finished, she regards it with a feeling of being a very Judas, inwardly classing it with his kiss, and with Jael's draught of milk.

The five hours have dwindled to four, to three, to two, to one. The time-measure has changed to that of minutes, and of even them how few are left ! For the solitary "once" of its shambling existence, the 4.38 must have been punctual, and the young horse must have flown ! With this last reflection mixes, itself another little one, odious in its spitefulness, that perhaps Rupert is less nervous as to that animal's shying properties when they are hidden from him by his being in the brougham, or that at all events, his superior fear of his father will hinder him from betraying alarm. Her latest thought of him before meeting is an uncharitable one ; and now they are here ! With her Judas-face dressed in false smiles—this is the position as inwardly classified by herself—she meets them on the doorstep. It is her betraying arm that Sir George chooses to lean upon, as he gets, with the feeble deliberation of ill-shaken-off sickness, out of the carriage.

"No, no ; you may be off !" he says, ungratefully pushing away his son's gently offered aid. "You never were anything but a makeshift !"

Sir George's pleasantries have always had a disagreeable flavour, and to be known as pleasantries only by experts ; but that this is meant for one neither of the young people, intimately acquainted with the hall-mark, and not for a moment to be taken in by imitations, however close, fails to recognize ; so they all smile. It is on Lavinia's left arm that her uncle is leaning—a circumstance to which is due a comment on his part which she could well have spared.

“Why, your heart is knocking like a hammer ! I did not know that a mosquito had a heart.”

The touched intonation with which he utters the phrase shows her that he attributes her palpitation entirely to the joyful emotion caused by his return, and how absolutely unsuspecting he is of any other possible cause for it ; and her impersonation of Judas appears to herself more lifelike than ever, as she answers with a desperate playfulness—

“You have learnt a new fact in natural history.”

Rupert does not immediately follow the slow little procession to the study, whither Sir George, with a nostalgia for his own chair, chooses to be led, occupied, doubtless, with directions to the servants ; and there is time for the “surprise” to be detected and admired, and for several anthems of thanksgiving, not worded exactly as the rector would have done them in church, on the part of Sir George on having at last escaped from the d——d pot-house before his son rejoins them. As he enters the room, Rupert’s father is in the act of asking how the newly papered “nurseries” look ; and, on Lavinia’s faltering avowal that she has not seen them since they were finished, starts irritably up, announcing his intention of immediately visiting them, to see whether the papers are well hung, or exhibit seams between the strips, as had been the case with Hodges’ work in the offices last year.

It is in vain that both Rupert and Lavinia entreat him to defer his survey till after tea. With a reproachful observation, that “if you want a thing done you must do it yourself,” he sets off, and the

young man and girl follow, offering him attentions which he ignores. The sight of well-executed work restores him to good humour, and he keeps his young people dancing attendance on him for some time, to admire at their leisure, and with what countenances they may, the airy spaces where their problematical offspring are to sport. Fear of betraying the loathing that the idea of her own possible motherhood brings with it, perhaps partially dulls Lavinia's sense of that repulsion. Tea-time brings another ordeal with it.

"I cannot say that you do much credit to the Princes' cuisine," says Sir George, taking stock of his niece more closely than he has yet done, having, in fact, ordered her to move the skilfully interposed tea-kettle, or her own chair, so as to enable him to do so. "You must have lost quite a stone in weight since I left home."

"Don't you know, sir, that there is nothing that the young woman of to-day dreads so much as putting on an ounce of superfluous flesh?" asks Rupert.

Lavinia is thankful to him for his timely interposition; yet it frightens her. Why should he come to her help? Can he have any intuition or knowledge of her sore need of it? and by what creepy coincidence has he used the exact phrase employed by Binning yesterday in connection with himself: "An ounce of superfluous flesh"? There is in reality nothing to excite wonder in the employment of so common a turn of expression; but to a soul so guilty the most ordinary sentence seems

heavy with ominous significance, and she hurries out her own less tactful repartee with needless treading on the heels of her cousin's.

"And how many stone have *you* lost?"

Sir George looks bored. "Thank you, my dear; but we need not bandy civilities on the subject of our infirmities." Then with a quick and determined return to amiability, "Come, let us hear all about poor Binning? He went yesterday?"

"No; this morning."

"Poor chap! I should like to have shaken his hand again before he went. I tried to persuade this slug of a fellow to run down and see the last of him, but he pretended that he was afraid to leave me. I must tell you that his filial piety has become a most appalling nuisance, and that he is like nothing in the world but an old hen with one duckling."

"I proudly own to the 'old hen,' but I fail to see the duckling," replies Rupert, with a pleasant slight smile.

Formerly he would have been far too nervous to bandy jokes with his father, and they would have been stamped upon if he had; but the answering smile on the elder man's grim sick face tells Lavinia upon how much happier terms son and father now are than in any previous period of their lives. She is the ribbon that ties their hearts together! *She!*

"Was he pretty fit? Did he set off in good spirits?" asks Sir George, holding on as firmly to the Binning theme as if he knew that he was passionately desired to loose it.

"Féodorovna did not say."

"Féodorovna!" repeats he, with that snort of disgust with which he has never failed to salute Miss Prince's name ever since the day of her storming his study.

"Yes; she came here this morning."

"Whom did she come to console *this* time?" asks he, jeeringly. "*You?* Well," in a changed and softened key, "I dare say she did not make such a bad shot! I dare say you had grown quite fond of the poor chap from having nursed him; one *does* get fond of one's nurse, with the best intentions in the world to the contrary," with a grudgingly affectionate glance at Rupert.

His son smiles again. (How enviable! how miraculous to have such a cheerful light heart!)

"You are in a fine flow of conversation!" he says, laying his hand on the old man's shoulder. "But you know as well as I do that you will have to pay dearly for it, if you do not take your usual rest before dinner. Your room is ready, and *I* am ready; and *you* are ready, aren't you?"

There is authority mixed with the pleasant persuasiveness of the tone, and with a docility which would have filled Lavinia with amazement in any other circumstances, Sir George hoists himself out of his chair, and saying, with an appealing lift of his shaggy eyebrows, "See how I am bullied!" walks slowly but contentedly off on his son's arm.

Once again Rupert has come to Lavinia's rescue. Once again, left behind, she feels the sense of relief coupled with a great fear. How has he known the

exact moment at which the catechism was becoming unbearable to her? the exact moment at which to step in? She has a quarter of an hour in which to supply answers "to taste," in cookery-book phrase, to this question, and at the end of that time she has the opportunity of putting it, if she feels so disposed, to the person to whom it refers; for he rejoins her.

"I have left him; he will have a better chance of getting to sleep if he is alone. He is so excited that he will go on talking if he has any one to listen to him. I could not stop him."

"And yet you seem to have wonderful power over him! I never saw such a change!"

She has got behind a cane chair, and is tilting it up, with her hands clutching the gilt top. She ought not to let him see the sickly apprehension in her eyes; and yet if she does not, if she allows him to approach her, if he kisses her, and expects her to kiss him back, by what hair's breadth will she be separated from the outcasts in the street? There is gross exaggeration in the idea, which is weighted by the offended purity of all her former life; yet there is truth too. But Rupert's steps pause far short of her barrier, and there is neither a claiming of undoubted rights, neither enterprise nor even entreaty in his eyes.

"Improvement, should you say?" he asks, with cool interest; adding, "How do you think he looks—better or worse than you expected?"

"Better—worse!" she stammers, contradicting herself, quite put off her balance by the fraternal

ease and matter-of-factness of his tone. It seems like a return to the blessed brotherly period, before they had been driven into exchanging the airy chains of their phantom engagement for the gyves and handcuffs of a real one. After all, he had been driven into it as much as she! There is balm in the thought. "I mean I cannot quite make up my mind until he has settled down; he is certainly much thinner."

"Yes; his clothes hang a bit loose upon him."

Lavinia starts; imperceptibly, she hopes. Has Rupert given himself the word to use no phrase that does not bring Binning in very self before her? Binning's clothes, too, hang loose upon him. Lest her start should *not* have been imperceptible, she covers it quickly with a remark.

"He seems in excellent spirits."

"Yes; but we all are that, aren't we?" He says it simply, and without any special observation of her to note its effect; and yet once again, for the third time, that nameless suspicious fear of his having found her out lays its chilly fingers upon her. "Shall we walk off some of our exuberant cheerfulness? Do you feel inclined for a stroll?"

Her last "stroll" returns upon her memory with dizzying vividness.

"Isn't the sun rather hot still?"

"We shall not feel him in the woods, or in Rumsey Brake by the pool."

Her tilted chair—needless defence—falls on its fore legs with a sharp noise, dropped from her trembling grasp.

"I do not think I feel woody or poolly."

"We will go along the high-road, then, the road to Sutton Rivers. There is always a good deal of traffic along that road—nice carts and steam-rollers and things!"

A spice of the old light mockery flavours his tone, and she knows that he has read off like print the misgiving in her mind. If he has read that, how much more may he not have read too?

The road chosen drops down the hill, and runs through the village. They pass the beautiful old farm that looks like a manor-house, with its bronzing walnut trees that wear their spring favours differently from most others; past schools and open cottage doors, Rupert greeting shirt-sleeved men with the familiarity born of a lifetime of nods, and Lavinia saluting matronly women with an intimacy sprung from maternity-bags. And as she goes, the village tragedies present themselves for competition with her own. Can that girl who has "gone wrong," and is sitting on her parents' doorstep with her unfathered child upon her knees, feel a greater weight of remorse and shame than one kiss has crushed her under? Can the old widow whose last surviving son was carried off yesterday to the madhouse, feel a deeper, more irreparable sense of loss than hers?

"Joe Perry was taken away to the asylum yesterday," she says, imparting her lugubrious fact, though not the comparison for which she has used it, to her companion. "He became so violent that it was unavoidable. His mother, I believe, fought like a tiger to prevent it!"

"Poor soul!"

What fitter ejaculation can he make in answer to such a tale? and yet her diseased fancy instantly brings to mind that Binning had applied the same epithet to Féodorovna! As they pass another cottage—

"Carter has gone on the drink again."

"Has he?"

Yet a third. "Little Harry Brown has got double pneumonia; the doctor does not think he can save him! He says he has no constitution."

"Is it to bring down that exuberant cheerfulness of ours that we were talking of, that you are telling me all these catastrophes?" asks Rupert, rebelling at last.

"It does seem rather hard to be greeted by such a list of casualties," she answers, confused and confounded; "but you see you have been away a good while—long enough for more than our *usual* average of disasters to happen."

"And is that all? Does little Harry Brown end the catalogue?"

The question is a perfectly natural one, and put as naturally, yet it sets her trembling again.

"Yes, I think so."

"If you remember any more, I would rather hear them."

To that she seems to think no answer needed. They are beyond the village now, and on that high-road whose sociability he had vaunted to her. For the time it seems less frequented than he had promised, the workmen having gone home, and no

market-day enlivening it with uncertainly driving men and gaily-hatted girls, three on a seat, in returning market-carts. Their only companion is the Spring, in that gaudiest of her moments when she is about to lose herself in Summer, daring her elder sister to vie with her sheeted hawthorn, her "golden chains," her matchless output of leaf and blossom. And how blessedly different is each tree and shrub's idea of spring! How various their method of expressing it! Some in odorous flower-bunches, some in green tassels, some in uniformity of colour, some in motley, their varying thoughts are diversely coloured, bronze and yellow, and dazzling gold-green.

To pause a while seems almost a necessity, yet Lavinia shivers; for Rupert has stopped and faced her, and there is no one in sight. Has he lured her hither with an assurance of publicity, only to make his belated claim upon her? As before, he reads her fear, and answers it.

"No!" he says, stepping back a couple of feet, yet still holding her at the disadvantage of commanding that full-face view which is so much less manageable a thing for the purpose of concealment than a profile; "do not be afraid: there is not the least cause for alarm! I only wanted to ask you if you are *quite* sure that little Johnny Brown's double pneumonia closes our casualty list?"

Then she knows that he knows.

CHAPTER XIX

BUT *how*? Have not her inward misgivings warned her all along? Yet it can be only by intuition. Even had any one seen her in Rumsey Brake—the very fire of hell seems to scorch her at the suggestion—even had any one seen her, what opportunity has that unknown talebearer had of betraying her to Rupert? Rupert returned only half an hour ago, and has had speech of no one but herself and the servants. Is the porter at the station likely to have conveyed the news of her unfaithfulness to him, as an agreeable item of local intelligence, while shouldering his portmanteau? or the coachman to have shouted it through the front window of the brougham? Yet to the abject terror of the girl's guilty consciousness, either of these absurdities seems more likely than that the significance of her *fiancé's* tone in reiterating his question came there by accident? He *knows*, if not by the ordinary processes and channels, yet by right of that terrible plate-glass window into her soul, of which he has always had the monopoly. All her life he has saved her the trouble of explanations, by a mastery of her thoughts which makes utterance of them superfluous. If she allows him, he will save her trouble to-day.

Athwart the darkness of her terror of discovery

flashes an arrow of light. If he knows already, what use is there in further feigning? If he knows by intuition, he will know by the same means how she has struggled; how utterly against her own will has been her disloyalty. Already an insidious sense of relief and comfort is beginning to steal over her in the flashed idea of how easy he will make it to her; of how perfectly his unselfish insight will apprehend by what innocent steps she has grown guilty towards him; and again he will be the brother from whom she has no secrets; together they will acknowledge the fatal error of their late attitude towards each other; together they will admire, with easy minds and steadfast countenances, the cheerfulness of the nursery wall papers. And her uncle? And her debt?—the debt whose colossal obligation the partner and cause of her unfaithfulness has so fully admitted; has so little blinked the overmastering necessity of paying? It is all packed into thirty seconds—relief, hope, recurring terror and despair; the thirty seconds between his question, and the one with which—how unlike her in its shiftiness—she answers him.

“Why shouldn’t it? Do not you think there are enough already?”

“Quite; but all the same there *is* another.”

“What do you mean?” A sort of false stoutness of heart is coming to her aid. It is impossible that he can know except by intuition, and what is known only by intuition may be safely and successfully denied and given the lie to, if only it is done with enough brazenness and pertinacity.

He answers her with a collected insistence that shows her of how little use her unworthy subterfuges have been or ever can be, as between these two.

"We have not been taken away to a madhouse ; we have not gone on the drink ; we have not got double pneumonia ; but it is to *us* that this last casualty has happened !"

She stands before him disarmed, her poor toy weapons knocked out of her shaking hand ; yet she essays one more feeble parry with her helpless buttoned foil.

"We don't seem much the worse for it, whatever it is," she answers, trying to laugh.

"Don't we ? I think you can't have looked in the glass lately."

She puts up her hand with a gesture of futile anger to her face, as if to chastise it for its blabbing treachery ; but speech has gone from her.

"I do not want you to tell me anything about it," Rupert says in a steady voice. "It could not be pleasant for you, and it would do me no good. I wished to bring you out—not on the high-road ; that was your own precautionary measure"—with a faint stinging touch of sarcasm—"but out of possible eye and earshot, to consult with you." She turns her woeful eyes, in a deep humiliation of asking upon him ; but words are still denied her. "To consult you as to how we are to get ourselves out of this *impasse*." Once again her dumb look seeks to penetrate his meaning. "It would be perfectly simple if it were only we two ; we might settle it

between ourselves. It is, of course, my father who complicates it."

The voice is still even and quiet, but its matter-of-fact composure affects her far more than any raving denunciation could do. What does it take for granted? And why? She must speak, must protest, must find out how much he knows.

"You are implying that you wish our engagement to end? Have you—any—any reason for it?"

"*Haven't I?*"

The question thus returned upon her would strike her once more dumb, if she did not wrench a faint retort out of herself.

"You—you know your own feelings best."

"And *yours?*"

Oh, if he would choose any other weapon of torture—any reviling, any accusation, any sneer, any reproach, anything but these questions that, terrible in their brevity, seem to lay her helpless soul even more naked before him than his lifelong habit of divining her, joined to who knows what added knowledge have already done.

"I had—I have no intention of breaking it!"

"I am quite"—"in the dark as to what you mean," she would have added, but the superfluous lie dies unborn. "You meant to marry me—*still?*" Then she touches the depth of her degradation; hearing the anguish of an incredulity that is yet belief in her confession of such an intended treason against him pierce through his self-control.

"Did I quite deserve *that?*"

Her wretched head drops on her breast, and she

stands at his mercy, attempting no further denial. But, as she has never in her life appealed to him in vain for help or sympathy, so, even now, the old habit is too strong for him.

"We must keep our heads clear!" he says, after a moment or two, in a voice that is no longer anguished or reproachful, but has regained its level of colourless quiet. "We must think it out. If we could stave off the marriage for a few weeks or months, I see a way out of the difficulty."

Her lips are apart by reason of the shortness of her breath, but she forces them together to frame the two words—

"What way?"

His face, at whose unfamiliar rigidity her spirit has quailed, softens.

"I would not have told you so suddenly in any other case," he says, with all his old gentle considerateness; "but now—at the pass we have arrived—it may come to you almost as a relief."

"*What* may come?"

"Your—your sacrifice would not avail the old man for very long! He—he is not going to get well."

She stares at him, not half comprehending. "Gout does not—does not—*kill* people!" she stammers.

"No. But in his case the doctors have discovered that it is complicated by a fatal disease, which has already made great progress; so that, as I say, if we can only stave it off for a while—not a long while—things will come all right!"

"*All right!* Do you call that *all right?*" she cries it out in an agony, taking in now the full meaning of his words; while, in flood, a miserable realization of this new calamity pours over her soul.

Her men! who had loved her so well; upon her fond tendance of whom she had prided herself! One is not; the second is only to be rescued by the hand of death from a more quickly slaying knowledge of her false cruelty; and, as to the third, now that the mask so steadily held before his face as long as there was any need for it has dropped away, —she can see that she has killed his heart!

"Is it quite certain?" she asks, as soon as her dry mouth allows a husky whisper to creep through it. "Is there no hope?"

"It may be sooner, it may be later; but it must come!" He pauses a moment or two, to let her take it in; then, very gently, "So that if we can only hit upon some plausible reason for postponement——"

She breaks in like a sudden hurricane. "No! *no!* NO!! If he is going to die, he *shall* have his little bit of happiness first! You *must* marry me! You cannot be so inhuman as to refuse!" Then, seeing, or fancying, a start of shocked negation on his part, "I have done nothing bad enough to make it a disgrace to you, and it need be only nominal!"

"And his hopes?" Like three icy drops the low words fall on the flame of her passion; and for a minute or two entirely quench it. Then it springs up again alive and alight.

"He will be dead before he knows that they are not to be realized."

There is a heavy silence ; while, before her mental vision, the dreadful programme she has drawn up of their future life unrolls itself. What his thoughts are she cannot tell ; nor whether he will accept or reject her offer. Even when he does speak, she remains still in the dark, for he only says—

"And then ?"

"And then what ?"

"When he is dead ?"

She gives a dry sob. It has come to this, then ! She has brought it to this—that what ought to be the prime calamity of the death of him to whom she has owed everything but the bare and dubious gift of life, is to be regarded only as a subsidiary incident in the drama of ruin which she has brought upon them all !

"When he is dead !" she repeats automatically ; but Rupert treats it as a question.

"You will be saddled with me for perhaps fifty years, and"—with a smile, cruel in its gentleness—"I am afraid I am too great a coward to release you by suicide !"

She starts as if stung by a hornet ; and yet taking to herself a sort of horrible comfort from his words. Yes ; that is why she has betrayed him ; that is why she has never been able to love him really ! He is a coward. He has been telling her so for three and twenty years ; and there is no reason for disbelieving him ! They have been standing still

on the high-road ; but now she breaks away from him, walking so fast that it is a moment or two before he overtakes her. In wordless wretchedness they step along side by side, the sweet Babel of evening birds in their ears, the acrid sweetness of hawthorn in their nostrils, and death in their hearts.

"Even if I freed you from my presence, as, of course, I should do, there would still be the legal tie," Rupert resumes presently, in a matter-of-fact voice, whose would-be indifference the dead whiteness of his face and a slight twitching of the lips contradict. "I believe that, under the circumstances, it might be got rid of; but it would involve a publicity that would be painful to you."

She listens dully, so dazed with pain as to feel that he must be talking of some one else.

"And if it were *not* got rid of," she foggily hears him continue, "it would, of course, shut up any possible avenue to future happiness for you."

At that her great anguish breaks through the merciful fog that has begun to envelop it.

"There is no such avenue!" she answers thickly.

He glances at her with what looks like compassion. "You think so now, but you will not think so always."

"Always! always!" she repeats choking.

He shakes his head as one knowing better. "I am afraid your plan will not hold water," he rejoins, not irritating her by any *spoken* contradiction of her asseveration of perpetual woe. "We must think of something more feasible."

His voice is so coolly dispassionate that once again, and for the last time in both their lives, the balm-bringing idea flashes across her that he does not care much after all—that his finicking womanish nature is incapable of the pangs of a great thwarted passion. But one glance at the profile beside her in the lined patience of its self-government, knocks the unworthy prop from under her self-esteem.

They cover almost a mile in total silence; two miserable blots on the sweet pageant of evening. They meet a herd of cows returning to their juicy pasture after milking, straggling over the road, snatching mouthfuls out of the lush hedges; a few children loiteringly picking flowers, and wastefully tossing them away, with the prodigal cruelty of Mother Nature herself; a farm servant tittering over a gate with a ploughboy. Married birds sing the joys of the nest and the family, and one blackbird seems to keep pace with them as they go, merely to mock them with his liquid telling that, as his Creator had done, he finds his world of the hedge and the pasture and the new green tree very good. Both Rupert and Lavinia are dully sensible of the jar with the surrounding happy suavities that Lavinia's resumption of the conversation brings with it.

"Can you suggest anything better? You must remember how short a time we have."

"Yes, I remember."

"If you are quite resolved not to marry me——"

"I am quite resolved."

"You have never told me why?" She says it faintly, glancing at him with that new and most uncharacteristic shiftiness which she feels that his all-noticing eye must already have observed.

"If you wish I will tell you."

"No!" she answers with almost inaudible haste. "It is enough for me that you no longer wish it! I do not doubt that you have good reasons; but"—growing more distinct in a feverish sophistry of desire to put herself in the right—"let it be clearly understood that it is not *I* who go back from the bargain! *I was*—*I am* willing to fulfil it."

"Thank you."

The courteous irony of his gratitude stings her back into muteness; and again they walk on, unconscious of time or distance.

"I am willing to tell you what I have done, what happened, how it came about!"

"But I am not willing to hear."

Her offer has been incalculably difficult to make, and its refusal ought to bring her some relief; yet the mournful magnanimity of that refusal crushes her. She struggles weakly to crawl from under its weight.

"Though you will not listen to my explanation, you will take my word that I have not done anything absolutely disgraceful!"

He gives a sort of shiver, the kind of gesture of disgust—only a million times intensified—that she has formerly seen him make at any instance of glaring bad taste in art, literature, or manners.

"Yes, I take your word! Only"—with that

shudder in his voice—"don't say that you are sorry, and that you won't do it again!"

She bows her head in profound humiliation, accepting that stinging chastisement as so much less than her due; while at the same moment a contradictory flash of repulsion from him for being able at such a moment to see the æsthetic side of the situation whizzes through her consciousness. Between them they have slain all talk that can be possible at such a moment. Incapable of thought, her brain a caldron of boiling miseries, Lavinia sets one foot before the other, plodding blindly on; while Rupert—she has never possessed the plate-glass window into his soul, which he has always had into hers, so that what memories, projects, torments, occupy his mind during that last half-hour she never knows.

The sound of a church clock rouses both—her from amid her steam of boiling vapours; him from his unread thoughts. They have reached a part of the road where the railway runs parallel to it, and a gate, faced by another on the opposite side, gives entrance to the line. They pause to listen and count, impatient of the interval between the deliberate strokes.

"*Seven!* Surely it can't be seven! He will put himself into a fever if we are late."

Man and girl look at each other in shocked surprise, their own calamities for the moment entirely sponged off their memories.

"And—is it possible?" throwing an astonished glance of apprehension around—"we are close to

Rivers Sutton ! It will take us quite an hour to get home."

"Not if we run along the line !" The shot-out suggestion is Lavinia's.

"The line !" Rupert echoes doubtfully.

"Yes, the line !" she repeats in a passion of irritation at his hesitancy. "Are you afraid of being run over, or of the penalty of forty shillings ?"

The gate is locked, but they are on its other side in a minute, and racing along the grass edge that borders the metals. For the time every idea is abolished from both their minds, but that of reaching home with the least possible delay. In a perfect unanimity of distressful haste they speed along, scarcely spending words for fear of wasting breath after the first outburst of remorseful ejaculations.

"How could we have forgotten him ?"

"The specialist told me that the least friction or worry was above all things to be avoided."

They run along for a while in perfect silence, their long legs skimming over the abounding spring flowers that always seem to relish the railway bank.

Then Lavinia cries out, "What time is it now ?"

Without a break in his run, Rupert pulls out his watch, looks at it, holds it to his ear, and answers in a key of acute annoyance—

"It has stopped !"

"And Rivers Sutton Church clock does not strike the quarters ?"

"No."

"It can't be more than ten minutes past," she

rejoins, panting a little, though not much, for she is a muscular modern girl, and in good condition ; " for I hear the 7.10 : it has just left Rivers Sutton station."

" It is always late."

Lavinia casts a glance over her shoulder, still flying along, to see whether the train, faintly heard coming up behind them, is yet in sight ; and, having done so, pulls herself up to a stop with such sudden violence that her knees rock under her. The horrified cry that accompanies her arrested motion stays Rupert's flying steps too, though the impetus of his going carries him several paces beyond her before he can stop himself. Astonishment at what can have checked a haste so urgent as hers makes him too look round, gives to his sight also the object that has frozen her flight into a paralysis of still horror. A curve of the line hides the approaching train from their sight, though their ears plainly inform them of its increasing nearness ; but at what appears to be about halfway between the point at which they stand and the curve, though in reality it is much nearer to themselves, a little child is clearly seen standing out against the strong yellow light of the May evening—a little child obviously at that most dangerous age which has legs to toddle, but no judgment to guide those legs. Probably it has crept through a gap in the hedge from the pointsman's cottage, which they had passed close to the locked and climbed gate ; but the two spectators of its prowess have no time to speculate as to how it came into its present position of imminent peril.

"It is all right ; it is on the up line," Rupert says, with a sort of hiss.

"No, it isn't ; it is on the down."

An instantaneous thought leaps from one pair of eyes to the other ; and in Rupert's Lavinia reads a blind terror. That sixtieth part of a second reveals to her that it has been the apprehension of her lifetime to find such a terror in his eyes at some such crisis of his existence—the predominating, all-mastering, terror of an injury to his own skin. If the endangered infant is to be saved, it will not be by him. Without a second glance at her companion—yes, she is *almost*—would to God she could be *quite* sure afterwards that she had not thrown him one glance of contempt or reproach !—she rushes back along the way she has come at the highest speed of which her already strained limbs and labouring lungs are capable, taking instinctively to the metals themselves, so as not to be impeded by grass and flowers. Will she be in time ? She tries to shout a warning to the little toddling thing, but not a sound louder than a useless dissonant whisper will issue from her protesting throat.

The train is coming round the curve. The engine, with its rocking train of carriages, is rounding into sight. Thank God, it has not got up its full steam yet ; it is not going nearly at its highest speed. If it were, there would not be a chance. As it is, there is just a possibility. It all depends upon whether she can hold out. Yes, she *will* hold out, even if she drops down dead the moment afterwards. No, she *can't* ; her powers are going to abandon her

just too soon, just when she is within a hundred yards of the object to be rescued. She staggers—recovers herself—runs a couple of yards—staggers again; drops on her knees, and then falls flat—happily half on to the up line. She has just sense enough left to drag herself quite on to it—just sight and hearing enough left to be aware of a hatless figure making the air sing in its mad rush past her to meet the locomotive, before consciousness leaves her.

CHAPTER XX

"How is he?"

"Just the same."

"Not conscious?"

"No."

"Never has been?"

"Not for a moment."

It is the morning that follows that "serious and it is to be feared fatal accident on the line between Rivers Sutton and Shipston," to whose occurrence at 7.15 p.m. on the previous evening the *Shipston Weekly Advertiser* will give a paragraph in its next issue, and the London papers record with greater conciseness, and in smaller type.

The interlocutors are exchanging whispered questions and answers in the verandah, Mrs. Prince having risen at an unprecedented hour, and laden her carriage with a pharmacy of drugs to show her neighbourly sympathy; and Mrs. Darcy having spent the night at Campion Place, a vigil to which her appearance lends no improbability.

"I do not yet understand quite how it happened."

"Will you mind coming a little farther from the house?"

"But I thought you said he was quite unconscious?"

"So he is; but *they* are not."

"To be sure! to be sure! Poor things! poor things!"

They tread out stealthily on the sward, where the morning meets them in its still wet splendour of dew and flower. The young sun has flung away the thin rosy scarves that lightly swathed him at his birth, and is magnificently wheeling up the eastern sky. In the shortening shadows the pale green leaves of the late tulips carry little globes of bright moisture upon them, and their gallant deep cups still hold some of the wine of the dawn.

"The servants tell me that they were walking along the line. How came they to be walking along the line?"

"They were late, and afraid of keeping Sir George waiting. It was the shortest way home." The rector's wife pauses, her dead-white face and sunken eyes turning towards the glory-promising mist, through which the trees, fields, oast-houses of the weald, dwindled by distance, are beginning to pierce. Her voice sounds like that of one reciting a lesson, which she knows will have to be infinitely repeated.

"And then?"

"They heard the train coming up behind them, and Lavinia looked round to see how near it was, and saw the child on the line."

"Whose child was it?" asks Mrs. Prince, with an irrelevant curiosity which jars—if anything can

still jar upon nerves so strung and tense—on her hearer.

“It was the pointsman, George Bates’s. The mother had run in next door to speak to a neighbour, and left it alone in the house !”

“It is a scandal that such a thing should be allowed ! A child of two left alone in a house !”

Mrs. Darcy acquiesces, faintly conscious that the unescapable worst of her story is still ahead.

“And then ?”

“Then they both set off running back as hard as they could to try and reach it in time.”

“Yes, yes ?” rather breathlessly.

“Lavinia stumbled and fell.”

“How very unlike her !”

“But Rupert ran on.”

“Yes ?”

It is hard to be pulled up so near the *dénouement*, as Mrs. Prince feels, but yet it is evident to even her not very acute perceptions that, for the moment, whip and spur are useless. Yet, after what is in reality a very short interval, the tale is taken firmly up again.

“He got up just in time, snatched the child, and threw it safely on to the grass.”

“Yes, yes ? Oh, *please* go on !”

“But then—then”—will she ever be able to get through it ? and this is only the first time out of hundreds that she will have to repeat it—“he seemed to lose his head ; he stood for half a second right in front of the engine, and one of the buffers knocked him down, and the whole train went over him !”

It is done ! She has got it over ; but of course there will follow a flood of questions and comments.

Mrs. Darcy has not long to wait. After the strong shudder that the dreadful narrative provokes comes a train of horrified curiosities as to detail.

"Was he—they told me not, but yet I can't understand how it could be otherwise—was he terribly mutilated ?"

Mrs. Darcy puts a thin hand up to her mouth to oblige it to cease twitching.

"Not in the least ; beyond the injury to his head, from which he has been unconscious ever since, and a slight wound in the right leg, there was not a scratch upon him."

"How miraculous !"

"The train was going quite slowly."

"Then his life might have been saved—he might have got off scot-free, if he had not lost his head ?"

"Yes ; if he had not lost his head." Oh, is not it nearly ended ? how much longer will it continue ?

There is a respite of a few moments ; but when Mrs. Prince's next sentence appears it is in the nature of a comment that makes her companion regret the questions that have preceded it.

"In any other case one would have said that it looked almost like *suicide* ; but, of course, in his, that is absolutely out of the question."

"Absolutely !"

"How did you hear the details ?—not from Lavinia ?"

"My husband went down to Rivers Sutton

Station last night, after — after Rupert had been brought home, and saw the engine-driver and fireman."

"Dear me! how shocking!" The ejaculation is not one particularly apposite to the special fact recorded; but at least it needs no answer, nor do the sincere tears that follow it, nor the struggle with a *pince-nez*, which refuses to remain riding upon a nose which is being blown. "And Sir George! Poor man, in his state of health too! I suppose he is quite crushed, stunned?"

The catechism has recommenced; but to this question, at least, the answer is easy and readily given.

"Do you know what he said to me just now, when he came out of Rupert's room to speak to me?" Mrs. Darcy asks, her wan face lit by a strange shining in the fagged eyes. "He said, 'No one can say that I have not had two brave sons!'"

"*No one can say that I have not had two brave sons!*" repeats Mrs. Prince, with an accent of stupefaction. "He took it that way? Well, I am afraid we all have been rather in the habit of taking poor Rupert for somewhat of a muff!"

The other turns away, writhing at having her own thought translated into the brutality of words. Who has held Rupert so cheaply as she? During the enormous hours of the so-called short summer night, how many slighting words and contemptuous thoughts have risen upon her remorseful memory? She has always, always belittled him; always sought to set him lower in the esteem of her for

whose love he has served through so many unobtrusive years. Always, always, except—thank God, that there is an except—on that last day in the kitchen garden—is it possible that it was only the day before yesterday?—she had taken his part, had spoken up for him—had done him some tardy justice! To her over-wrought feelings—unbalanced by sleeplessness and shock—the thought of that one half-hour seems to be all that can make it possible to her to endure herself!

“I shall not attempt to see him—I mean Sir George,” says Mrs. Prince, sobbing with an unchecked frankness of emotion which smacks more of her original class than of the one to which she has attained. “But be sure you say everything that is kind and proper. And tell him from me that if there is anything of any sort that we can do or send, we shall be only too glad. One of the most valuable privileges of wealth is to be able to help its less fortunate friends in their need!”

She goes away still sobbing, but partially comforted by her own bit of bunkum, and the thought of the magic properties of the Dropless Candle. An out-of-place flash of what, under less dreadful circumstances, would have been amusement at the thought of Sir George’s frenzy at being patronized as one of Mrs. Prince’s less fortunate friends, darts incongruously across the rector’s wife, as she turns her steps homeward. Her household has to be arranged for; so as to do without her during the next and perhaps many succeeding days—a deprivation to which they usually so strongly object as

quite to prevent it, but in which they now acquiesce with tearful eagerness.

Yet what can she do for the stricken household? Can she lift the lids of Rupert's shut eyes, and bring consciousness, recognition, forgiveness, into them? One agonized ejaculation from Lavinia has revealed to her that the knowledge of having something to forgive had come to him, before setting off on that last walk—a knowledge that had, perhaps, helped him to “lose his head.” “*To lose his head!*” Yes; that is the phrase which she must always employ, never quitting her hold upon it during the hundreds of times that she will have to repeat the tale. As she stands listening outside the shut door, Lavinia steals out, a ghostly noiseless shadow in the morning light.

“They want more ice!” she says, looking at her friend with dead eyes that do not seem to see her.

“I will order it for you. Is there any change?”

“No, none; but”—an angry terror bringing life back into her face—“that does not mean anything bad?”

“Oh no; not necessarily.”

“They do not expect it yet?”

“Of course not, of course not. While I fetch the ice, won't you change your dress? it would freshen you, and I would call you in a moment if there was any change.”

“No, no; he might speak. Just while you are calling me, he might say some one thing; he may be saying it now.” And she slips back into the darkness.

But the days pass, fall into the ordered routine of habit, and Rupert does not speak, does not say the one thing for which Lavinia listens day and night—the one thing whose utterance can keep her sane. It is not her fault that there is any interruption day or night to her listening; and, while forced away for necessary food, there is but one thought in her mind—the thought that he may speak, and she not be by to hear! Daily she strains her ears to listen through the ordeal of the luncheon or dinner, to whose endurance she compels herself for his father's sake, and through the worse ordeal of relating to Sir George over and over again—since he is never tired of hearing—how it happened. Oh the torture of that repetition! and the keener torture of that explanation which on the first relation has to be given, and has more than once to be repeated, as not quite clear!

“You say that you were ahead! How did you come to be ahead?”

“I caught sight of it first; that gave me a start.”

“And you were within a hundred yards before he caught you up?”

“About that, I think.”

“And the whole distance was a quarter of a mile?”

“I should think so.”

“How was it that he did not overtake you sooner?”

“He—he had a greater distance to cover; he had run on ahead of me before we saw it.”

"How much ahead of you?"

"I can't say."

There is such a helpless anguish in her voice that he stops questioning her for that while; but the doubt and the explanation are sure to crop up again at the next of those dreadful meals, spent in hiding their own food, and compelling each other to swallow his or hers.

"I can't quite understand how you kept the lead so long!"

Slightly varied, it always comes back as a question, a wonder, a reflection, and she learns to recognize with a terrible sharpness the signs of its approach. Her uncle's own illness seems to be in abeyance, kept at arm's length by the force of his will, and through those dreadful days of waiting his spirit maintains a strange level of exaltation.

"We put the saddle on the wrong horse when we called him Milksop!" Lavinia hears him say repeatedly, in a tone of triumph.

He is very tender in his manner towards his niece, going entirely out of his own character to entreat her to eat, and trying humbly to emulate the son he had despised in self-forgetting attentions, and he rives her heart and conscience unknowingly by the sympathy and pity for her in her tragically interrupted nuptials, which every one of his words and actions implies.

CHAPTER XXI

THE day that was to have been that of Rupert Campion and Lavinia Carew's wedding has come.

"I am always afraid of some ill luck when the bride does not change her initials," Miss Brine has said in the Rectory school-room, in answer to the children's lamenting comment upon the fact.

A thoughtful silence follows the governess's utterance, broken by Phillida, who says meditatively—

"Then if Lavy had married Captain Binning, she would have been all right."

But the wily Brine is not to be trapped into any such admission.

"Miss Carew would undoubtedly have changed her initials in that case," she replies cautiously.

Lavinia had hoped that her uncle would—in the general upsetting consequent upon the catastrophe, the removal of all the landmarks of ordinary life—have forgotten to note the date of a day so outwardly identical with its gloomy fellows that it would have passed unnoticed in its obscurity and disgrace ; but luncheon-time undeceives her.

"This is not quite the way in which we expected to pass this day !" he says, after sending away the servants. "It is rather rough on you ; but there is a

French saying, I believe, that what is deferred is not therefore lost. There may be a good time coming."

The cheerfulness valiantly forced into the old voice for her sake, in his new selflessness, must, at whatever cost to herself, be met in the same spirit, and she compels herself to repeat in French the saying he has alluded to, with what—since intention is everything—must do duty for a smile, "Ce qui est diffère n'est point perdu."

"Though it may not be to-morrow or the day after, we shall perhaps still hear Darcy exhorting you and him to increase and multiply!" continues Sir George, with a distressing attempt at pleasantry, and a painful harking back to his old theme. "In any case, it will do no harm to drink to your wedding day. Come, let me fill your glass."

She holds it out with an unshaking hand, and commands her throat to swallow, to drink a toast, the fulfilment or non-fulfilment of the wish contained in which are alternatives equally horrible. And then they return hand-in-hand—the old man has added a new caressingness to his other tendernesses—and resume their places, one on each side of the silent, motionless form stretched between them with bound, ice-covered head, in the darkness; and Lavinia takes up again her day-long, night-long employment of repeating over and over and over again to herself the question which she is beginning to see written in red whenever she turns her eyes in the obscurity—

"*Did he lose his head? Was it suicide? And if so, was it something he saw in her face that drove him to it?*"

She is going through them in the usual sequence at about four o'clock in the afternoon of her wedding day, when she happens to be for a few moments alone with the still living rigidity beside her, when in the almost complete darkness, her eyes and ears—or have they gone mad too?—detect, or seem to detect, a slight movement in the bed. She darts noiselessly to the window, and, pulling aside a bit of the curtain, casts a glance backwards towards the bed—a glance that can hardly travel, for the weight of the hope it carries. Whatever *she* may be, her senses are not mad; nor have they told her a lie. Rupert is feebly stirring, and his eyes are open. In a second she is at his side, and stooping over him; the word is coming—the priceless word on which her reason hangs! It is spoken so low that she has to bend very close down to catch it. It is only an almost inaudible—

“Well, dear!”

In the reeling immensity of her joy, she can but stupidly echo, almost as inaudibly, the greeting that seems to have come to her from the speechless other side. “Well, dear!” There is a long pause. Into Rupert’s eyes, as they turn slowly round, the watcher sees consciousness, recollection, gradually returning. When those long-absent inhabitants have reoccupied their seats, will he take back his greeting? While the answer to that inquiry is in suspense, the functions of life seem suspended in her. The slowly wandering eyes return to their point of departure—her face; regained knowledge is in them; but neither anger nor pain.

"I muffed it, as usual," he says, with a ghost of his old self-ridicule, and, wearied with the exertion of speech, falls back into unconsciousness.

* * * * *

Sir George has never been what is called a "professing Christian," which indeed is a title that seems to promise a paucity of performance ; but ever since Rupert's accident, he has daily asked Lavinia—possibly only with some dim feeling of a propitiatory sacrifice to a fetish—to read him a portion of Scripture, and on the evening of that wedding day he finds with some difficulty—for he does not know his way about very well—the chapter that tells of him who, even while being carried out to burial, was recalled to life and to the widowed arms that had thought to have for ever loosed him. He listens, leaning back comfortably in his chair with a sort of smile of triumph on his face ; and on the open page Lavinia's tears drop hot and blessed as she reads.

During the night that follows Rupert speaks again, and though it is only to ask for water, the two or three languid words keep the flame of hope alive and steady in the watchers' hearts. On the next day he has a slightly longer interval of consciousness ; on the day after that a longer one again ; and on the day after that for a whole hour his eyes are open, and faint speech rises to his lips. If he were allowed, he would by-and-by even ask questions ; but rigorous quiet is enjoined upon him, and since it is Lavinia with whom he makes most efforts to converse, she is banished from the room. Such exile is of comparatively little

moment to her now, now that it will be possible to her to wait, and wait sanely, even for weeks and months, for the answer to that question which she feels she must yet put.

Since she last looked at them, the horse-chestnuts in the Rectory garden are quite over. They were in fullest bloom the day she passed them going to Rumsey Brake. Was it B.C. or A.D. that she was last in Rumsey Brake? The former date seems far the more probable. The door into the churchyard opens cautiously. Lavinia is standing under the verandah, and through it appear, as they have appeared many times a day during the late crisis, the Darcy children. Almost always they have borne gifts, and to-day is no exception.

"Could not he fancy one of his own eggs?" asks Daphne, lifting the lid of a basket on her arm, and displaying the creamy ovals of three beautiful specimens of the product of the clerical poultry-yard.

"I am sure that he will in a day or two; but why his *own*?"

"We have re-christened Gatacre, and called him Rupert," explains Daphne. "He is always the one who begins laying first."

"If we had known that Rupert was a hero, we should have christened a hen after him long ago," says Phillida, coming to her sister's aid. "But one can't always tell by people's *looks*, can one? I think that heroes ought to have some mark to know them by; but Miss Brine says it would be invidious."

"There could be no mistake about beloved

Captain Binning !” says Daphne, with the delightful liberty to express its preference of sweet and wholesome childhood. “One saw at a glance what *he* was.”

“The *Nubia* has got to Las Palmas ; it was in the paper this morning,” says Phillida. “But of course you saw it.”

Until the mention of Binning’s name, Lavinia had been enjoying the company of her young friends ; now the one desire concerning them that occupies her mind is, that they should go.

“You must remember that for the last ten days I have seen and heard nothing. I am as behindhand in my information as a convict,” she answers, laughing uneasily.

The days pass, each one with a trifling gain to distinguish it—perhaps only a curtain allowed to be a little more drawn back ; an atom more colour in the pale lips ; a fuller sound in the thready voice. Every day some small stretched privilege is accorded, each dealt out with a frugal hand, that feels its way tentatively, lest the bruised brain should avenge itself for any temerity in hurrying it to be well. Whether thanks to these precautions or to a natural wiriness, Rupert is apparently returning to life and vigour, without a throw-back, and with an even steadiness that—considering the nature of the accident that has laid him low—seems nothing short of miraculous.

“Humanly speaking, we are out of the wood,” the doctor says.

It is needless to state that he is an old doctor. A young one would have scorned the possibility of

there being any other way. Since he is "humanly speaking, out of the wood," Rupert is allowed to receive one visitor a day for half an hour at a time ; and since Sir George and Lavinia do not count, it is a party of three that gathers round his bed, on the occasion of Mrs. Darcy's being for the first time admitted. In the midst of the gentle heartiness of her greeting to the explorer so lately returned from the dim limits of life, the rector's wife catches herself wondering whether Lavinia is recalling the last time on which they had met by a sick man's bed ; or whether the preceding weeks have wiped it off her memory, as they have wiped the youth off her face.

"Tell the rector we shall require his services sooner than he thinks," Sir George says, his face, scored with time and sorrow, beaming at Susan from the other side of the bed. "If only this lazy chap will hurry up. I believe he enjoys lying here and being pampered."

"I am sure he does," Rupert answers, with a white smile.

"We are thinking of August or September at latest," continues the old man, looking round half suspiciously at the three faces about him, as if defying contradiction of his optimism.

Rupert has never contradicted his father. He does not now.

"If we make it September, we shall have the hop-pickers to grace it," he answers, with another little smile.

"Can you never look at life except from the ridiculous point of view ?" cries his father, in quite

his old manner. Then, riddled with remorse, he falls to scolding Lavinia for having—as she has not, nor is ever likely to do—forgotten the moment for administering some potion or extract.

The girl smilingly rebuts the accusation, appealing quietly to the clock to defend her; but the curtain at the bed-head—it is an old-fashioned tester—which her hand is desperately clutching, could tell a less placid tale. She does not quite hear what next passes, and is aroused only by the sound of Sir George's voice uttering a strident fiat.

"Time's up!" he cries, with his watch in his hand, in slight to the clock which has proved him wrong; "and we do not allow a minute's law."

He marshals Mrs. Darcy relentlessly out of the room as he speaks, and the cousins are left *tête-à-tête*. Rupert's fingers play a meditative tune on the bed-clothes; and Lavinia, watching him, and vaguely trying to make out what is the air which they are intending to convey, is surprised by a criminal thought of what a much less virile hand it is than that which she had seen lying in the gauntness of its departed strength on the other man's coverlet. The air continues, set to a slight sigh.

"It is odd to hear him beginning to harp on the old string," says the man's weak voice.

Lavinia gives a slight shiver. Is the theme to be taken up again, just where the striking of Rivers Sutton Church clock had broken it off five weeks ago?

"I do not think you ought to talk of anything agitating yet."

"But it does not agitate me. A knock on the head is not supposed to be a sedative, but in my case it seems to have been one."

The voice and look are as calm as the words, but he has stopped his drumming on the sheet ; and she waits in silent apprehension, praying that the subject may drop, since she knows that the time is not yet ripe for her to put her one question. Rupert, however, as is soon clear, has no intention of dropping the subject.

"Poor old gentleman ! He is not quite up to date, is he ?"

Lavinia is trembling all over. Has not the moment now come for her to fulfil the vow so solemnly taken, so intertwined with her frantic prayers for his restoration as to be inseparable from them ?—the vow to cleave to him through life and death and eternity, without one backward glance, if he be but given back to her extremity of asking ? And now that the Invisible Awfulness, whom she had wearied with her insistence, has accomplished His part of the bargain, how dare she tarry with hers ? If she does, may not He take back His boon, and leave her to endure an existence made unendurable by a for-ever unanswered question ?

"If he is not up to date, neither am I," she replies.

Rupert's eyebrows go up in the old familiar way. "Is that a riddle, dear ?"

"No," she answers, purpose and voice strengthening as she proceeds, "it is not a riddle ; it is good plain truth. If you mean that your father is not 'up

to date ' because he still believes that we are engaged to be married, *I* am in the same boat, for *I* still believe it."

Perhaps from the feebleness of his body, perhaps from an inability to frame an answer that can nicely hit a case so difficult, the young man is silent ; but there is no hostility, nor even much melancholy, in the glance that first rests on and then delicately averts itself in compassion from her convulsed face.

"I have been disloyal to you," she goes on, fighting down her distress lest it should gag her before she has time to get her full confession out. "I offer again to tell you to what extent——"

He stops her with a prohibitive movement, full of dignity, of his pale hand.

"No," he says ; "I have no wish to know the tale of kisses. Many or few, we will take them for granted."

Her head sinks on her breast in an agony of shame.

"Many or few, they are past and done with," she cries out. "And now I *beg* you to forgive me ! on my knees I beg you to forgive me !" As she speaks, she suits the action to the word, and drops on her knees beside the bed.

He looks at her, disturbed at the humiliation expressed by her whole being, yet with an underlying calm that dominates her.

"The only thing that I can't forgive you is your present attitude," he answers ; and, as he speaks, there is just enough of gentle disgust in his voice to

bring back before her, in prosaic strength, his æsthetic detestation of all scenes, rows, uglinesses.

"I *must* keep it till you answer me," she returns, chilled, yet persistent. "Will you forgive me? and will you prove it by marrying me?—by marrying me as soon as you get well? I will stay here until my knees grow to the carpet, if you do not say 'Yes.'"

He lies silent for a moment or two, considering her with a sort of high, detached pity.

"I have no alternative," he answers, with a grave smile. "Since you wish it, I will marry you—when I get well; and now, would you oblige me by standing up?"

CHAPTER XXII

So it is settled. Her prayers are answered ; her vows are fulfilled. Everything is, or will be upon Rupert's recovery, as it was. *As it was ? When ?* Before Binning's coming ? Her soul, half-lightened of its burden of remorse, awaking to new pain, cries out in bitter protest, " My God !—*no !* " And yet to all appearance it will be so. To all appearance she will take up the thread of life where she had dropped it on the day of her uncle's and Rupert's return from London. There is no hurry about her question now. She will have countless hours of married intimacy in which to put it.

During these weeks of reprieve—she gives an inward dread start at the reappearance of such a word in her vocabulary in such a connection—besides the new armour that must be forged for her on the anvil of endurance, there is not one of the old pieces which she will not need. Even her lifelong *rôle* of buffer will have to be reassumed, since, as time passes and confidence strengthens, Sir George's angelic qualities retire a little into the background. The wearing tempers and frets of sixty-five years, that have been driven to their holes by the scourge of a great affliction, begin to show their ugly heads

again. Once again with pseudo-patient irritability he turns over his food at luncheon, and sends messages of ironical compliment to the cook ; once or twice he even snubs Rupert, though, in these cases, repentance follows so hard upon his sin as almost to overrun it. It is always for not being in enough haste to be well, that the father chides his son. Rupert has never been one to hurry, and he does not hurry now.

"One would think that a man with a wife and a parson waiting for him might try to pick up a bit quicker !" Sir George says one day, champing his bit after finding Rupert with writing materials by his bedside. "If he can ask for a pen and ink, one would think he might just as well ask for a hat and stick."

"The pen and ink would tire you much the most of the two," Lavinia answers, with a soothing smile, but not thinking it necessary to add that a like idea, in a modified degree, has crossed her own brain.

Rupert is *not* in haste to be well. From the doctor's and nurse's point of view, he is an ideal patient, never rebelling against the restrictions prescribed him, content with the narrow monotony of sick-room routine, with no restive manliness kicking against limitations cried out against as needless and unendurable. But then Rupert has always been more like a woman than a man. Hasn't he always regretfully said so ?—regretfully, not for being like a woman, but for not being really one. After all, his solitary heroism—*was* it heroism ? for what else could he have done ? and his first impulse was

undoubtedly *unheroic*—was a sport, an accident, that did not in the least represent the tree that grew it. The heart is an inn which harbours strange guests, and the landlord can't be held answerable for their characters. Yet it is with an unspeakable horror of self-condemnation that Lavinia recognizes the quality of the visitors her own has been entertaining. They have been expelled with loathing; but nothing can alter the fact that they have lodged there. What a distance has she travelled from the hell of remorse—the anguish of pleading beside what was supposed to be Rupert's bed of death!

And, meanwhile, gentle, courteous, and content, Rupert sails, if not fast, yet with a fair wind, upon the pleasant waters of convalescence. Visitors are daily admitted, and the Darcy children have, of course, been prompt to offer their congratulations. But the visit has been vaguely felt by all not to have been a complete success. Rupert has never been quite at his ease with the Rectory's warlike brood, oppressed by a feeling of his own destitution of the muscular qualities which they set so much store by; and though they are far too honourable not to have admitted him unhesitatingly to their Valhalla, yet one and all have a hazily uncomfortable feeling that he has got there by accident. The introduction of Geist to lighten the situation, though well-meant, does not turn out a success, since the Dachs has a rooted belief that all persons lying flat and white in bed at wrong hours are murderers. Like a reversed Balaam, having been brought to bless Rupert, he curses him instead, and there is such ominous purpose

in his stiffened and stuck-out four legs, and the free exhibition of the whites of his eyes, that a hasty removal from the bed upon which he has been confidently lifted is found advisable. Lavinia accompanies her young friends to the door into the churchyard, as a sort of consolation stakes for the flatness of their visit.

"I never saw Rupert in bed before!" says Daphne, with a sort of awed interest.

"Do you think he looks *quite* as nice as darling Captain Binning did?" lisps little Serena, stealing an insinuating hand into Lavinia's palm.

"Do not be silly!" cries Phillida, who of late has shown faint symptoms of a slightly inaccurate knowledge of good and evil. "Nobody looks nice in bed; they are not meant to!"

• • • • •

"He is doing it on purpose—to give you time," Phillida's mother says a day or two later to Lavinia, who has made a remark that indicates her wonder at Rupert's indifference to recovery.

They are pacing the Rectory garden, now on fire with the gaudy flowers of full summer, for July is well advanced. Mrs. Darcy makes her suggestion hesitatingly, since it hints at a subject that must be for ever closed between them, adding, in a lighter key, and with a touch of humour—

"He knows that Sir George can't hale him to the altar in pyjamas; but that as soon as he has got one arm into a coat-sleeve his father will drag him up the aisle by it."

Lavinia laughs a little.

"I feel sure," continues the other, growing quite grave again, "that this is one more instance of that consummate tact of his, which is the outcome of his perfect unselfishness."

Lavinia looks at her friend with a sort of distrust. "What a special pleader you have become! I never heard such a change of tone!"

Her companion's thin white cheek grows faintly tinted.

"Did you ever hear of such things as remorse and reparation?" she asks in a low voice; and the tragic force of the response, "*Did I?*" silences them both.

Miss Carew feels that her occupation of buffer is already resumed, now that she has daily to parry her uncle's attacks; the attacks which compunction and his late agony of fear prevent him from directing in their full force against his son himself; attacks that take the form of ever more impatient questions and astonishments as to why Rupert does not sit up, come downstairs, go out of doors, if it were even in a Bath chair? He alludes to the latter vehicle in a tone of such contemptuous concession, that his niece cannot help a furtive smile.

"You know, dear, that the doctor says he ought to keep his leg up a while longer," she answers, pacifically.

"Pooh! What is the matter with his leg? It is as sound as yours or mine. It was a mere scratch to start with, and there is a scarcely a cicatrice left now."

"But it is swollen still," she urges, quietly but firmly. "Dr. Wilson thought it was more swollen this morning than it was at his last visit."

"Fiddlesticks ! He says it to oblige Rupert ! That boy has got round you all !" and he flings away in a pet.

He has resumed his complacence in the afternoon, not from having conquered his ill humour—a victory which, save for the period of his son's imminent peril, he has, as far as his family are aware, never attempted ; but because he has got his wish. Rupert, at his own express desire, has been taken out in a superb Bath chair borrowed from the Chestnuts ; a Bath chair consecrated to Mr. Prince's gout ; and to make the offer of which to Lavinia that great inventor has himself driven over to Champion Place, prefacing his proposal with his usual prefix, "I do not wish to be intrusive !"

Rupert has been out for an hour ; gently pushed along under the shade of the lime trees, of which one or two belated ones still throw down a remnant of the ineffable sweetness of their yellow-green blossoms upon him. His father and his betrothed are on either hand. Sir George's jokes are never very good ; and it is to-day harder than usual to Lavinia to laugh at his stupid pleasantry as to their being like the lion and the unicorn that support the Royal Arms. Rupert does not attempt to laugh ; but he smiles with kind serenity. At even a better jest Lavinia would be too busy to laugh—too busy stamping down the outrageous thoughts, regrets, revolts, that keep swarming up in her heart,

vipers warmed into life by the very sun of her cousin's restoration. Oh if he were *only* her cousin ! only dear Rupert, her brother-friend ! Oh if he were a woman—the woman he has always sighed to be ! Oh if he were always in a Bath chair ! The monstrosity of this last aspiration conducts her to the hall-door ; and it and its brother evil spirits are but ill laid as she pours out tea for Rupert, as he lies sighing with satisfaction at having regained it, upon the sofa at his bed-foot.

"I may now hope for twenty-four hours of blessed supineness," he says, throwing his head back on the piled cushions with an epicurean air.

"I believe that you would like to be always supine !" Lavinia answers, in a tone of wonder, and thinking at the same time, "What a charming head it is ! how delicately modelled ! what a finish in the moulding of the features ! what a *spirituel* expression, with something of the light malice of the classic Mercury !"

Spirituel ! It is an adjective more often used in the feminine than the masculine gender. Oh, tricky gods ! Why is not he feminine ? What a delightful woman he would have made !

"And you would like it too !" he rejoins, breaking into her reflections, with what sounds more like a statement than an inquiry ; then, seeing her start apprehensively with the old fear of his gift of thought-reading, he adds, "I mean that you—that most 'neat excellences' like you, would wish to keep me always in a position to be fussed over, always prone ; no, that is not the right word—"prone"

means that one has fallen forwards on one's face, like poor Dagon, doesn't it?"

He talks on with so evident an intention of removing any uncomfortable impression that his former speech may have made, that Lavinia, having by this time risen to give him his second cup of tea, lays her hand, with some dim sense of compunctious gratitude, upon his.

"You are very glib to-night!" she says playfully. "Aren't you chattering too much? You must be tired."

"No!" he answers, "or only a little; just pleasantly."

His eyes—how blue their whites are!—lift themselves with a sort of yearning, that yet seems to have none of the commotion of passion in it, to hers, and she feels that she ought to kiss him. If she think about it, she will never get herself up to the sticking-point; so, without a second's delay, with the teapot still encumbering one hand, she takes the plunge and drops a little butterfly kiss somewhere about the roots of his soft curly hair.

"Thank you, dear." He asks for no repetition of the endearment; and she wonders shamefacedly whether it would have been better taste to omit it.

"I think I'll leave you now. You look tired!"

"I am not tired; and you must not leave me; for I have something to say to you."

"Say it to-morrow."

"With your permission I will say it to-night."

With a little show of half-playful authority, he pulls her by the hand, which she has laid upon him

before the doubtful enterprise of her kiss, on to the foot of his sofa, moving and contracting himself to make room for her.

"Well, if you must, you must!" she answers, submitting, while a vertical line shows itself between her well-drawn, thin eyebrows.

"I will not keep you long! All I want to say is, that, supposing I *do not* get well——"

"Why suppose anything so senseless?" she interrupts angrily.

"It is senseless, of course. I was reading a magazine article yesterday, on the subject of longevity, and, as far as I could make out, I have all the signs that indicate it, and several more besides!"

"Then spare us your suppositions!" she interjects, almost roughly.

"I think not. After all, there is no harm in supposing! *Supposing* breaks no bones, and I have often noticed that clauses in wills providing for contingencies which seemed almost impossible yet not seldom take effect!" Since Lavinia makes no comment, he goes on with resolute courtesy, "So that, if you do not mind, I will repeat '*Supposing I do not* get well——'"

"Yes?" she answers, sullenly acquiescent.

"I want it to be clearly understood that I have no wish that you should play at being my widow—that you should offer up your good solid flesh-and-blood happiness" (is there the faintest tinge of sarcasm in this description of her conjectural felicity?) "with some Quixotic idea of expiation, as a sacrifice to my manes!" She cannot speak. Is it the scent

of the great old heliotrope that climbs the trellis up to the very window-edge, that makes her feel faint ? " It is even a moot point whether I shall have any manes ! " Rupert goes on half dreamily ; " but even if consciousness survives the grave, which, of course, I am far too advanced to believe—— "

He pauses with a slight ironic smile, and she listens in a bewilderment of distress, oppressed by the old thought of how little she really knows of him. She cannot even be sure whether his confession of unbelief is made in jest or earnest. She knows not whether, or with what numb agnosticism, with what grey creed of nothingness, or with what faint flickering cresset of faith, Rupert has met the sorrows of life; will, when his hour strikes, confront the sharpness of death ? His voice goes on evenly—

" Even if consciousness does survive, it will not give me the slightest satisfaction to know that you have cut your heart out to throw it as a complimentary tribute on my funeral pyre ! I have always liked your bonny locks, dear, and I should fret like the blessed damosel whom I have always wished to be, if I saw them pining and dwining away into skinny unsightliness ! You have no talent for hair-dressing, and I hope and believe that St. Catherine will go *uncoiffed* by you ! " He pauses a minute, and then resumes, as composedly as before, but with a more entire gravity, " You will be very lonely ! "

" How *dare* you say *will* ? " she interjects, dashing her hand across her smarting eyes.

" You *would* be very lonely, " he corrects himself at once. " The old man will not hold out long.

This spurt is wonderful, but it will not last ! ” Then the smarting eyes have their way, and let loose their tears. They are drawn forth from their springs, almost more by the calm aloofness with which the prophecy is uttered, than by the prophecy itself. What a long long way from her—from them all—Rupert seems to have got ! Her tears do not appear at all to affect him.

“ So let it be clearly understood,” he says, raising himself into a sitting posture, taking cold possession of both her hands, and plunging his clear eyes deep into her watery ones, “ that when I die—pooh ! what does a preposition matter ?—*if* I die, then, let it be clearly understood that I *wish* you to marry—to marry and bear children to people that nursery which we have both heard so much of ! ”

The light inveterate point of irony pierces, as if against his will, through the last sentence. But for a sob or two, she has listened to his harangue in absolute silence ; her painful excitement rising by rushes to the highest possible pitch. Is not *now*, if ever, the moment to put her question ?

“ You have said your say,” she begins, her chest heaving as high as it had done during that awful race with Fate along the railway line, seven weeks ago. “ And now I have to say mine. I have long had a question to put to you.”

A ripple of uneasiness skims over the exalted calmness of his face.

“ Are you sure that it is worth putting ? ”

“ Quite sure.”

“ Put it, then.”

"I have long wished to ask you—I must ask you, now, whether on that day——"

"Well?"

"When, after having saved the child, you so unaccountably remained standing, for two or three seconds, right in front of the engine——"

"Yes?"

"Whether"—was there ever a mouth so like a bit of charred stick as hers feels?—"you lost your head? or—whether you did—it—on purpose—with a deliberate intention of—suicide?"

The word clothes its ugliness in a hissing whisper, but there is no doubt as to his having heard it.

"What next?" he asks with—is it half-contempt, or what he means her to think so?—"what maggot will your brain breed next?"

But now that every muscle, nerve, and fibre of her body are strung up to their highest tension, he shall not escape her.

"That is no answer to my question. Did you lose your head? or did you mean to kill yourself?"

If he hesitates for one instant, she will know what to believe. But he does not hesitate.

"I lost my head!" he answers, meeting the thumbscrew and hot pincers of her torture-chamber without a wince. "Not having been brought up to the trade of hero, I did not understand the ropes, and—I lost my head!"

• • • • •
Did Rupert Campion speak truth? or has he added one more to the tale of noble lies?—to Rahab's and Arria's and Desdemona's?

CHAPTER XXIII

“Why, he but sleeps !
If he be dead, we'll make his grave his bed ;
With female fairies shall thy tomb be haunted.”

MRS. DARCY has always set her face strongly against forenoon visitors. The claims of the parish upon her time have never—thorough-going, though not enthusiastic, clergywoman as she is—preferred at whatever hour of the day or night, found her wanting. Always the dispensary ticket, the medicine-chest, the patient ear, the sensible counsel, the wisely sharp rebuke, the warm fellow-feeling in trouble, are ready. But that idle country neighbours should drive the ploughshare of their vacuity through the furrows of her already overfilled forenoon, when they might just as easily bestow their tediousness upon her comparatively free afternoon, is beyond the limits of her patience. Her soul, though taking up its task from the beginning, with the same handsome willingness as her slender body, has from the first revolted against being nothing but a clergywoman.

“When I married,” she has said to her one intimate, Lavinia Carew, “I told myself that, however much I might live in a kailyard, I would *not* be

a cabbage. I would have all the new books, the reviews, and the *heavy* magazines, and would be quite up to date ; but, my dear, I reckoned without my host. I did not forecast the frequency with which Sam Smith would come in with a broken head, and that ass Féodorovna with a broken heart."

Yet it is that very Féodorovna who, accompanied by her mother—a mode of expression which fits their mutual relations—now sits at 11.30 on the morning of the day that follows Rupert's first outing in the Chestnuts Bath chair, in the Rectory drawing-room, without exciting any symptoms of protest on her hostess's part. All three women are crying, but, since there are as many modes of weeping as of laughter, each in a distinctly different way. Two perfectly silent tears—evidently escaped convicts, with protesting warders behind them—are making their forbidden way down Susan Darcy's pallid cheeks ; Féodorovna has buried her face in the sofa cushion, with much appropriate flourish of White-Rose scented cambric ; and Mrs. Prince is sobbing in that bang-out-loud perfectly unbridled way which betrays her plebeian origin.

"Oh, Cara !" Miss Prince has just sighed out, "if you would try to control yourself ! if you would not make *quite* so much noise !"

Mrs. Prince knows that when her daughter addresses her as "Cara," she has about touched the nadir of that young lady's good opinion, and she makes an honest effort to check her sniffs and gulps.

"It is enough to make any one break down !" she weeps in deprecation—"to think that only last

evening Sir George took the trouble to ride over to thank us for the loan of the Bath chair, and to tell us what a world of good it had done the poor fellow ! I told him we were only too glad ! After all, what is the use of wealth if it isn't——” Mrs. Darcy makes a restless movement. Its owner's exposition of the philanthropic aspect of the Candle's functions is more than she can quite stand at the moment. “And to think that it was not from the injury to the brain after all !” resumes the only momentarily interrupted lamenter ; “that it should have been that scratch on the leg that none of us thought anything of ! A *clot* !—that seems the last word of everything now ! A *clot*, or suppressed gout—or cancer ! To one of the three we must all come at last, it seems !”

They remain heavily silent for a minute or two, the great master of joy and sorrow's lines ringing in Mrs. Darcy's head—

“Golden lads and lasses must,
Like chimney-sweepers, turn to dust.”

“I suppose that there is no doubt about it *this* time ?” Féodorovna asks in a tone of refined affliction, intended to contrast in the highest degree with her parent's vulgar grief. “Once already he seems to have actually come back from the dead ! But this time I suppose there is absolutely no——”

“Absolutely none.”

“Would you mind telling us exactly how it all happened ?” inquires Mrs. Prince, with a sort of diffidence born of the recollection of how very much

the rector's wife had appeared to shrink from the narration of the original accident. "It seems a shame to trouble you ; but really, trifling as the distance is from here to the Chestnuts, it is astonishing how things manage to get garbled in the mouths of the domestics." Mrs. Prince always calls servants "domestics."

"Yes, I will tell you," replies Mrs. Darcy, dabbing her eyes hastily with a pocket-handkerchief, which at once returns to her pocket, nor remains *en évidence* like the other two. The sense of that former relation is strong on her memory also ; but it is coupled with the feeling of how much less painful and difficult the present one is than its predecessor. Here there is nothing to wince at or glide over ; no opening for implication or suspicion. "He had been talking to Lavinia while she gave him his tea ; she had left him, thinking him a little tired, but quite naturally and healthily so after the unusual exertion of going out of doors for the first time ; and about half an hour later he rang for the footman—you know that since the nurse went he has been waited on by the ordinary staff, and wonderfully little trouble he gave—and said he should like to go to bed. He undressed without any help, and was just going to get into bed when the servant, who had gone to the other side of the room to fetch something, heard him call out, 'Quick ! the brandy !' He ran to him as fast as he could, but by the time he got to him he was——"

"Dead ?"

Mrs. Darcy bends her head, as if in reverence as well as acquiescence.

"A clot?"

"Yes."

"And there was no one but the footman in the room? Which one was it? Oh, but I forget, since poor Bill went they only keep one!" After a moment's pause, "I should not like to die with only a footman in the room."

Mrs. Darcy is too profoundly sad to see the ludicrousness of the sentiment expressed; nor even to point out that, in the good gentlewoman's case, such a contingency is not likely to occur. She goes to the open French window, and stands leaning her hot head against the jamb. Susan had always grumbled that mignonette would not grow with her; had rejoiced that this year the seed which she had imported from France had given her an abundance of that chancey fragrance; but now she feels in angry pain that the perfume from the bed at her foot is too violent in its sweetness. She will never get seed from Paris again.

"'Quick! the brandy!'" she hears Féodorovna's voice repeating from the sofa with a species of shocked reluctance. "One could have wished that his last words had not been quite those!"

"Oh, what does it matter what his last words were? What does it matter what any one's last words are? We may all be thankful if we get off at the last, saying nothing worse than that!" cries Mrs. Darcy, turning round upon the speaker in a frenzy of nervous exasperation.

It is not often that the rector's wife allows herself the dear indulgence of lashing out at Féodorovna ; probably because she knows with what a right good will her heels, if given free scope, would flourish figuratively in Miss Prince's silly face. The unaccustomed rebuff sends its object *toque* forwards again into the sofa cushion, from which, however, she emerges rather hurriedly, expelled by a toy rabbit hidden beneath it by Serena on her last visit to the drawing-room, and which squeaks when pressed.

"It seems so dreadful to have it all to do over again, as you may say," ejaculates the elder visitor, presently. "How do they take it *this* time?"

"The old man is completely broken down," comes the response in a key of quivering pity. "But Lavinia is very brave." The moment that the phrase is out of her mouth, Susan dislikes and regrets it. How redolent it is of mock-grief! What a decent euphemism for the exultation that dares not yet awhile show its face! How often has she heard it applied to a widow for whom the lover—kept in comparative obscurity during many impatient years—is waiting round the corner to pounce upon when the grudged twelvemonth is out! Fortunately, the expression seems to have no such association for her auditors.

"Poor girl! she will break down later!" is Mrs. Prince's compassionate comment, uttered with a sort of satisfaction at the certainty of Lavinia's ultimate collapse.

"Perhaps."

"It is so impossible to realize that only this time yesterday they sent us back the leg-rest. I believe they had never used it."

"There had been no need for it."

"'In the midst of life we are in death!' Oh how true that is!"

"But oh, mother, how *banal*!" cries Féodorovna, disgustedly. "And you have said it three times already!"

It is the one solitary instance in their two existences in which Mrs. Darcy is "with" Miss Prince. But the insult to her "parts of speech" brings the parent up to one of her rare revolts against the tyranny of her offspring.

"Well," she retorts tartly, "I suppose we cannot always, all of us, be original. After all, there is nothing very original in death and sorrow—and—and judgment!"

"Oh, but that poor text *is* worn so threadbare; it has hardly a rag of clothes left on its back! Well, good-bye, Mrs. Darcy," taking the initiative in departure, as she always does when visiting in her mother's company. "Tell Lavinia that though she will not see me, I am with her incessantly in spirit. *She* knows that *I* know what sorrow is."

Mrs. Prince follows with her blunter adieux. "Well, good-bye. Give the poor things any message from me you can make up that you think will comfort them. And if there is any difficulty about catering—in these cases there is always a good deal of coming and going, and consequent eating and drinking—just tell Lavinia to send everybody straight

up to the Chestnuts. In an establishment of the size of ours, half a dozen more or less make no sort of difference. Well, good-bye, again. I am terribly upset. I think it is a hundred times worse than last time!"

But from this assertion of the superior tragedy of the present drama to that enacted on the same stage seven weeks ago, Mrs. Darcy's whole soul dissents. In the relief of recovered solitude she goes once again to the French window, once again leans her hot head against the jamb, but this time, in the intensity of her thinking, the over-sweetness of the mignonette in the bed at her feet goes unnoticed. The shows of things pass before her in their utter falsity, shouldered away by the underlying realities. To outward seeming how incomparably sadder it appears that Rupert should be rent away from life just when—as if in brutal practical jest—he had been restored to her warm mother's arms; just when hope was wheeling round him on her strong pinions, and love—

"With turtle wing the amorous clouds dividing,"

than that he should be transferred from bed to grave, for ever unconscious of the change!

Yet to her whom his going or staying most concerns, how beyond all words less terrible is this real death of the young man than the counterfeit one of seven weeks ago! Seven weeks ago he would have departed in relentless silence, unpursuable through the infinities of eternity by any agony of prayer or pleading, leaving behind him a wretched woman

with her debt for ever uncanceled, with the hounds of remorse for ever on her track. Whereas now, as Susan has already learnt from her to whom by his graceful dying he has renounced all claim, he has departed in magnanimous reconciliation, and selfless forethought for that future of hers in which he will have no share. Yes; it has been well done of him thus to die, tactful, like himself! She articulates the word under her breath, and, hearing them, catches herself up, aghast at the drift of her own musings.

Is it possible that she can have allowed a little satisfaction in such a calamity to creep into her mind? a little furtive thankfulness at her friend's release from the meshes of that terrible net which the fowler Fate had spread for her? Has she—she herself—no pity for the old man, who, as all the parish now knows, has the hand of Death—though a temporarily suspended hand—upon him? The old man out of whose weak grasp the staff has been ruthlessly knocked, before the few more steps during which he would have asked its support, have been paced? Has she no pity for the young man himself, mulcted of five and forty of his seventy due years, juggled out of bride and hearth, pitchforked into the unknown? Rupert had always gone to the wall. What a willing hand she herself had until lately—once again she thanks God that there is a “till lately”—lent to thrust and keep him there! Rupert has once more gone to the wall! Rupert is “out of the way!” Never in his lifetime would he have willingly been in it; but now he is finally “out of the way!”

CHAPTER XXIV

" It was the winter wild,
While the heaven-born child,
All meanly wrapt in the rude manger lies ;
Nature, in awe to him,
Had doffed her gaudy trim,
With her great Master so to sympathise :
It was no season then for her
To wanton with the Sun her lusty paramour."

No one can qualify by the epithet " wild " the Christmas that follows Rupert Campion's death. It comes simpering in with a faded grey smile, swishy soft gusts, and a mock-April taste ; and the Darcy family are conscious of no sting or frost-prick in cheek or finger as they stand silently round the new cross that heads Rupert's grave, and to whose final erection the workmen gave their last touches only two hours ago. For Rupert has elected to lie in the open, having notified his wish in a small memorandum, placed where it was certain to be found ; and which proves that him at least the ambushed enemy had not surprised by his spring.

Sacred to the Memory
of
WILLIAM DEVEREUX,
Elder Son of Sir GEORGE CAMPION, Bart., of Campion Place,
in the County of Kent,
Who nobly lost his life in rescuing
a brother officer from death, while serving his Queen and
Country, on the Field of Battle
in South Africa.

Also of
RUPERT LOVEL,
Younger Son of the above,
Who not less heroically died in saving
the life of a fellow-creature on a less glorious field.

"They were lovely and pleasant in their lives, and in their deaths they
were not (long) divided."

By the time that Susan Darcy's eyes have reached the last line of leaded letters, they serve her but ill; yet she can see the hackneyed text well enough to feel sure that it is not of Lavinia's choosing. In her mind's eye she can see the lonely pair bending together over the drafted inscription; the first mute, and then hesitatingly murmured hint of disapproval on the part of Lavinia, and the determined angry overriding of her gentle objection on that of the poor old man.

"Bill would not have cared," says Susan to herself, quaintly calling back to life the two dead young men to give a verdict on their own tombstone; "but Rupert would have hated it."

Her musings are broken into by an objection of another sort, whispered with the accompaniment of

eyes shining in distressed partisanship by her eldest daughter.

"Oh, mother, 'not less heroically'! Surely it was not nearly so grand as carrying off Captain Binning!"

"It was not so showy," answers Mrs. Darcy, lifting her eyes to the high summit of the cross itself, where, if she has been defeated as to the choice of a memorial text, it is clear that Lavinia's taste has prevailed.

Once again with sure intuition the rector's wife sees the contest that has been waged, and in which Lavinia has come off victor, between the Necropolis polished granite or alien white marble shivering under England's weeping skies, of Sir George's preference; and the rough stone of the country, soaring up in the fashion of the solemnly beautiful old Saxon crosses, wrought with figures and emblems of a faith yet young, of Lavinia's predilection.

"She must have had a tussle for it!" Susan says, once again addressing herself, and adding to her inward remark the rider, "How well I know her!" A second reflection corrects the present tense, "Should I not rather say, 'How well I *knew* her'? Shall I know her as well when I see her to-morrow after these five months of absence? Five months to-day since they went! How little she has told me in her letters! Have our souls grown so far apart, while she has been passing through her burning fiery furnace, and I have been scolding the children, and ordering dinner, and emptying my medicine-chest down the parish throats, that they

will not know each other when they meet?" A deeper thought laden with misgiving follows. Does the Refiner Himself recognize the silver that He has thrown into the melting-pot when it emerges again?

It is not often that the rector's busy wife can stand idle, deeply sunk in meditations, which her children, with their customary nice feeling, refrain from infringing by any of their usually numberless appeals. With noiseless reverence they are laying their wreath, made of flowers bought at the Shipstone florist's at a cost that has chipped a large paring off the two next birthdays, which jostle Christmas so expensively close, on the just replaced turf.

"We heard that it was up!" says a voice beside her, awaking Mrs. Darcy out of her grave musings, to find herself with two members of the Prince family, each laden with a magnificent "floral tribute" on either hand.

"Yes; it was finished this afternoon," she answers, giving a slight start, and speaking involuntarily half under her breath.

"*What* a beautiful text!" sighs Mrs. Prince, letting fall the tortoiseshell eye-glass which has helped her to read the inscription. "It is the one that, if it were possible, I should choose out of all the Bible to have placed over me."

"Unless you die simultaneously with my father, I do not quite see how it is to be managed!" answers Féodorovna, disagreeably.

Her mother reddens a little. "I do not see that that follows! Six months and more elapsed

between the deaths of these dear fellows ; and yet what can be more suitable and lovely ? ”

Miss Prince does not waste breath upon a rejoinder, but stoops her long body to place a superb cross of lilies-of-the-valley, which seems instantaneously to wipe out of existence the modest Shipstone Roman hyacinths, with their one frugal arum lily, in a prominent position upon the grave.

The young donors of the eclipsed offering stand by with swelling hearts. Their Christmas gift to the dead has pinched them to the extent of absolutely precluding the purchase of “Bobs’” last photograph, tantalizingly beaming on them from the stationer’s front window, to the attainment of which their mother has stony-heartedly refused to help them with a loan ; and about which Miss Brine has benightedly observed that thirty photographs of one individual must be enough for any private collection, were he ten times as great a hero as Lord Roberts. The monstrousness of the supposition that any such hypothetical demi-god can exist or ever has existed, and the consequent conviction that the governess is a pro-Boer, produces a warmth of feeling against that lady, which her departure upon her Christmas holidays only partially cools.

“They are coming home to-night, I hear,” says Mrs. Prince, stopping, in her turn, to deposit her sumptuous circle of orchids, but laying it unobtrusively just within the stone coping at the grave-foot, and somehow not making the children feel as small as Féodorovna had done.

“I believe so.”

"*What* a home-coming!" raising and straightening herself again.

"Yes."

"All animals creep to their lairs to die," pursues Mrs. Prince, shaking her head, and with a poetic excursion into the regions of natural history not usual with her. "I suppose that that is his feeling."

"I suppose so."

"How dreadfully flat those boys are singing!" says Féodorovna, affectedly, putting her hands over her ears to exclude the sound of the choir practice, floating in annual struggle with the Christmas anthem from the just dim-lit church.

Féodorovna's ear for music has never been her strong point, and a jarred surprise at the pretended suffering mixes with Mrs. Darcy's disgust at the petulant bad taste of the interjection.

"Shall we see poor Lavinia at church to-morrow, do you think?" asks Mrs. Prince, real kindness struggling in her tone with a rather morbid curiosity. "I declare that I shall hardly dare to look in the direction of their seat. What a life she must have led during these last five months, *tête-à-tête* in cheap lodgings, for I fear their means would not run to anything very luxurious—with that poor old gentleman going over the same sad story, day after day, day after day, as he did in the case of Bill! And I am afraid that sickness is not likely to have improved his temper. I am sure that I should not be surprised to hear that her reason had given way."

The apprehension expressed has certainly no

novelty for Mrs. Darcy. It has rung ominously in her ears many times since her last sight of the friend whose short letters, dated from so long a succession of dreary health resorts, as to prove the dying restlessness which is upon the old man, tell her so little in their uncomplaining brevity. Perhaps it is the grafting of another's crude, bald words upon her own scarcely permitted thought, which makes both seem unendurable. She turns hastily away, and all follow her from the grave, since, as far as the churchyard gate, their roads lie together.

Twilight has come upon them as they stand ; twilight passing in dim gallop into darkness—a darkness that will never be relieved by the little paltry moon, making its poor fight with the dominant vapours. Silence has fallen upon the two elder women ; but the tongues of the children, following hard behind with Féodorovna, are loosed.

“Mother heard from Captain Binning by last mail,” Susan hears Phillida say, in the tone of one communicating a piece of news of whose acceptability to its hearer there can be no doubt ; and Miss Prince's rather ostentatiously indifferent rejoinder.

“Oh, did she ?”

“He told her the details of that fight near Snyman's Post, which we saw the account of in the *Times*, when he was mentioned in despatches ; not that he said a word about *that*, trust him,” in a tone of almost personal pride in the joint valour and reticence of the related fact.

“The Boers had rushed a picket, which gave them good cover to pour in a heavy fire at close

range upon us, but after two hours' hard fighting we beat them off with heavy loss."

"Anyhow, we knocked the stuffing out of Commandant Reitz that time," chimes in Christopher, taking up the chant of triumph.

The young Darcys have never been fond of Miss Prince; but at least, upon the all-important subject of the war, they have imagined her views to be in absolute harmony with their own. What, then, is their stupefaction at her comment upon their pieces of intelligence?

"How brutal! and how brutalizing!" she says with a delicate shudder of disgust.

"They do not know: how should they?" says Mrs. Prince, lowering her voice. "But Féo has lost all interest in the war. She has got a new hobby. It is music. You heard what she said about the choir singing flat. There is a young organist at Shipstone who, according to her, is something quite out of the way. He won the F.R.C.O., whatever that may be, last year; and she goes every day to hear him play. Well," with resigned appeal, "it is a nice taste, isn't it? and her mind is so active, that she must have something to occupy it; but she *used* not to know one note from another."



The silence of children gone to bed, and of a rector having his final wrestle with the difficulty which he must share with many thousand clerical brothers, of saying something original upon the morrow's anniversary, broods upon the Rectory. Half a dozen

Christmas sermons of previous years lie neatly typewritten before Mr. Darcy, so that recognizable repetitions may be avoided. The double doubt as to whether he dare repeat a simile, certainly felicitous, but whose very excellence may make it remembered, and which had occurred in his discourse of '96, coupled with the question as to whether he shall insert any allusion to Rupert Champion's death, keeps him sitting with suspended pen at his knee-hole writing-table, though the church clock has struck ten.

Over the drawing-room fire Mrs. Darcy is sitting alone, with hands stretched out flamewards, telling herself that, in view of the fatigue of Christmas Day, with its workhouse dinner, its school tea, and many etceteras of festal labour, she ought to go to bed; but, reconciling herself to her disobedience to the inward fiat by the fallacy that it would be extravagant to leave so good a fire to burn itself out alone. Her tired body is in the Rectory drawing-room, but her intensely awake soul has travelled across the road, and up the sloping garden of Champion Place, to where, behind the latched shutters, the returned wanderers sit in the aloofness lent by their crown of sorrows. They were to arrive at half-past eight o'clock. Would she have done better if she had been on the doorstep to receive them? It was a feeling of delicacy that had kept her away; but would it not have been better to have risked being indelicate, so that *one* pair of arms might be opened to enfold the desolate couple, and put a little warmth into the deadly chill of their naked home-coming? Sir George has certainly gone to bed by now. The

later accounts of his condition, bare of detail as they have been, have indicated a declension into completely invalid habits. Lavinia as certainly is sitting over the fire alone—alone, like herself—but, unlike herself, with no nursery-ful of kissed children, no dear, pompous devoted husband so filling the vacant chambers of her heart, that absence means but a keener sense of their beloved presence. The telling her own riches strikes the rector's wife with a generous compunction, almost a feeling of guilt towards her friend in her cold heart-poverty.

“If I had only hung up a stocking for her!” she cries inwardly; and then derides herself for the puerility of the thought. “What gift capable of gladdening Lavinia's Christmas morning could Santa Claus himself put into her stocking? If it were not so late!” she says to herself, a moment afterwards; “if the bell would not wake Sir George——”

Restless with the thought of the other's forlorn neighbourhood, suddenly feeling that it is impossible to lay down her own tired limbs until they have carried her over the way to the mournful house darkening on the hillside above her, Susan rises, and, pulling aside the window-curtain, looks out—since the Rectory does not belong to the solid-shuttered breed of its eighteenth-century neighbour—on the night. It is such as the afternoon had promised—still, black, and murk; the little absurd finger-nail-paring of a moon wholly vanished behind the opaque vapours.

“I could find my way blindfold!” is the undeterred looker's thought; and so goes out into the

hall, snatches a bowler hat and an Inverness cape from the stand, and, unbarring the hall-door, starts back with a sudden shiver of alarm; for, before her, stands a tall dark figure, with a lantern in its hand.

"I was just making up my mind to ring!" says the voice of Lavinia. "What! Were you going out? Were you coming to me?"

"Great wits jump!" answers Susan, with a tremulous laugh, "Come in! come in!" and so pulls the girl over the threshold by her cold gloveless fingers, and into the glowing warmth.

"I must not forget my lantern! I do not know what I should have done without it! I could not see an inch before my face!"

"It is a pitchy night!"

Each utters her *banalité* mechanically—the elder in a strange moved shyness; the younger taking hungry possession, with her drawn eyes, of each familiar object.

"I had just been reproaching myself for not having hung up a stocking for you!" Susan says, with another nervous laugh.

"What would you have put into it?"

They are standing opposite each other on the hearthrug, Lavinia's hand still lying in Mrs. Darcy's clasp. Is it possible, the latter asks herself, in astonished self-chiding, that this stupid new shyness has mastered her so far as to make her wonder how soon it would be proper to release it? Lavinia herself solves the problem. Gently disengaging her fingers, she throws back the hood of her cloak, and,

for a heart-beat or two, they take silent stock of each other. The long thick wrap conceals the girl's figure, but face and hands betray that Miss Carew has dwindled to half her size. Yet did ever saner eyes look out from under level brows? Whatever else has happened, Mrs. Prince's lugubrious prognostic is not fulfilled. Lavinia Carew's reason has *not* given way.

"You have grown very thin!"

"Do not you remember that Rupert always used to laugh at me for my dread of getting fat?" Then, seeing the startled half-frightened look in her friend's face, "You wonder that I am able to mention him? Well, I have had good practice; for five months we have never talked of anything else! No!"—correcting herself—"I am wrong. Sometimes we have talked of Bill, but never, *never*, NEVER of anything else!"

"For *five* months?"

"Every day for five months—sometimes *twice* a day, for his mind is a good deal gone—I have given him all, or"—with a slight shiver—"almost all the details of the—the *accident*! If I had been asked beforehand, I should have thought that even an allusion to it would drive me mad; and I have had to describe it twice a day!" She makes her narration in a perfectly collected level voice, and her friend's false shyness dies for ever, overwhelmed by an avalanche of compassion.

"How are you alive?" she asks almost inaudibly.

"You must not pity me!" returns the other,

still with the awe-inspiring calm of one that has reached the limit of possible suffering, and come out beyond it into the dead waters of numbed endurance. "Other people—*all* other people would do that ; but I expect *you* to understand. I am *glad* to be punished ! glad to be working out my sentence like a convict. It is the only thing that has given me any ease ! I think that even Rupert, if he can see me—I do not think that he much believed that he would be able"—with a dragging accent of sorrowful reluctance—"but if he can, even he will think the expiation is not out of proportion to the offence !"

"It is an idea that would never have occurred to him !" says Mrs. Darcy, in a tone of the gentlest chiding. "You are forgetting him !"

"*Forgetting* him !" repeats Lavinia, slowly. "Yes," after a slight pause, "you are right ; crediting him with dismal dogmas of retribution, that he would have abhorred ! Yes, I must be forgetting him !"

"My dear," comes the voice of the rector, opening the door and looking in, with a brow cleared by having decided to omit the '96 flower of speech, and defer the allusion to Rupert till New Year's Eve, "what has possessed you to unbar the hall-door ? It surely is not a night for star-gazing ! *Miss Carew !*"

• • • • •

The Darcy Christmas Day has been worked through with its usual cheerful thoroughness. The reciprocal presentations ; the church services ; the

workhouse dinner; the school-children's tea, with its posthumous accompaniment of oranges and crackers; the servants' evening party;—nothing has been scamped. The family Christmas gift to the poodle has been a photograph of Binning, which he wears upon his brow—all other available parts of his person being already occupied by the effigies of general officers—when he is walked by his beautifully frilled fore paws between Phillida and Daphne into the mistletoed kitchen to open the ball.

* * * * *

Lavinia's Christmas Day has been worked through too, though in a different fashion. Mrs. Prince may cast her eyes upon the Champions' seat in church without any fear of a shock to her nerves, for it is as empty as it has been for the last five months. Sir George is too much tired by his journey for his niece to leave him; yet in the afternoon—an afternoon furnished with the apposite Christmas brightness which had been so lacking yesterday—he insists upon being dressed, and leaning on Lavinia's arm walks, with less of tottering in his gait than she had feared, to the churchyard, to see the new cross, about which he has been restlessly talking, asking, wondering, through half the night.

"I should personally have preferred granite, but as usual I was overruled!" he says fretfully; then divining and remorseful for her distress, adds, "But it is not amiss."

Both are silent for a little space, reading the inscription, which, by long debating over, amending, altering, has grown so familiar to both.

"It was his own choice to lie out here!" says Sir George, presently. "It would have seemed more natural that he should be buried with the rest of us—with his mother; but he always was rather a sport among us!"

Lavinia assents with a little heart-full nod.

"It is dull of me," pursues the old man, while a puzzled look comes into his dim eyes; "but I can't recall how we learnt his wishes! He could not have *told* us."

"We found them written on a sheet of note-paper just inside the middle drawer of his writing-table," replies Lavinia, with the gentle ready distinctness of one who, with perfect patience, has given the same explanation many times before.

"Ah, yes! that was it, of course. He was always fond of scribbling, poor fellow!"—with a look of relief at the recovered explanation. A moment later, in a low key of compunction, "And I used to get so out of patience with him, and ask whether he was writing a sonnet to his own eyebrow! What right had I to sneer at him because he was not cut on the same pattern as myself?"

"He did not mind, dear," very softly, with a pressure against her side of the wasted arm leaning on hers. Another silence, while about the steady peace of the church tower the jackdaws fly and call in cheerful harshness, and from behind the bravery of his little orange-tawny breast a robin throws out his living gladness across the Christmas-decked graves.

"Two brave boys!" says Sir George after a

pause ; but now there is a note of triumphant pride in the father's voice. "I always knew that I had *one* ! but I little thought the day would come when I should be able to say that there is not a pin to pick between them ! not a pin to pick between them ! "

CHAPTER XXV

"It is for homely features to keep home,
They have their name thence ; coarse complexions
And cheeks of sorry grain have leave to ply
The sampler, and to tease the house-wife's wool.
What need a vermeil-tinctured lip for that ?
Love-darting eyes, and tresses like the morn ? "

THE August sun is assuring the Rectory garden, as plainly as his beams can speak, that no scurvy trick shall be played with the marquee erected this morning with some trepidation of spirit—since the two previous days have been rainy—on the cricket-ground. In proof of his good faith, the God of Day is dragging their hottest spices out of the petunias and heliotropes, and out of Miss Brine the prudent counsel, addressed to her pupils, to put cabbage leaves in their hats. But how can paltry apprehensions of the off-chance of a sunstroke influence minds occupied by the knowledge that the whole air is full of the sense of approaching festivity ? Have not the hen-coops been moved from the banks of the Tugela River, in order that rounders may be played there ? Is not there to be a tug-of-war on the grass plot before the front door ? Has not a "donkey" been erected in a clear space of the

shrubbery? Are not numerous old boxes being chopped up into trays, to be used for tobogganing down the steep slope above the parterre? That the treat to the choir boys of St. Gengulpha's Church, Martin Street, Soho, London, which in her maiden days Mrs. Darcy used, for the sake of its excellent music, to frequent, is an annual one, does not lessen the excitement with which the arrival of the early afternoon train, and the hired brake and Rectory waggonette that convey the guests from Sutton Rivers station, is expected.

That blissful date is still three hours off, for eleven o'clock has just told its last stroke from the church tower as Mrs. Darcy, calm with the consciousness of made cakes, garnished dishes, and arrived chairs, puts foot across the threshold of the cool drawing-room of Campion Place. There is purpose in her eye, and resolution in her step, as she lightly crosses the carpet, and lays her hands on the shoulders of a black figure, sitting with its back to her, writing at a bureau. The figure puts out an abstracted hand backwards in acknowledgment of what is evidently a very familiar interruption, but her attention remains rivetted upon the "slips" before her.

"Isn't it astonishing that the corrector of the press can let such mistakes pass?" she asks, indignantly. "Twice they have printed *snouts* for 'shouts,' and *liver* for 'lover'! It makes such dreadful gibberish of the lines."

Mrs. Darcy looks over Lavinia's shoulder, and verifies the blunders alluded to; but it is clear that

the attention given is but a half-hearted one. In the early days of black emptiness which had followed Sir George's death in the previous January, of occupation gone, and spirits drooping to the very earth that had closed over the last of her "men," Susan had welcomed for Lavinia the editing of Rupert's "Remains" as a salutary distraction; but of late she has remorsefully to own to herself that she has grown rather tired of that "volume of posthumous verse," which takes such a long time in preparing for the press, and the emendating, noting, and prefacing of which, by her friend's not very practised pen, has robbed the latter of so many of the little out-door joys which stand first in the pharmacy of grief-healing.

Miss Carew apparently divines the faintness of her friend's sympathy, for she changes the subject.

"I sent the spoons and forks this morning! Have you enough now?"

"Plenty."

"Do you want any knives?"

"Bless your heart, no! Mrs. Prince has lent enough to cut the throats of the whole township."

"And how about fruit? There are still a good many white currants under the nets on the north wall."

"Currants!" repeats Mrs. Darcy, with affected scorn. "If you could see the size of the grapes that arrived, personally conducted by Féodorovna, just as we were sitting down to dinner last night, you would blush for such a suggestion."

"I withdraw it," replies the other, with a slight

grave smile ; adding, "One laughs at them, but they really are wonderfully kind."

"This was not a case of undiluted kindness," says the rector's wife, with her light and stingless sarcasm. "The grapes were but incidental ; the real object of her visit—I wish she would not pay morning calls just as the soup tureen is entering the dining-room—was to ask for an invitation for to-day for her organist."

"And you gave it ?"

"Of course ! Am I ever harsh to true first love ?" ironically. "She went conscientiously through his achievements all the same. How well we know them, don't we ?"

"As a little boy of ten he won sight-reading prizes at local competitions, while earning his bread as organist of Sutton Rivers Church !" replies Lavinia, the long-absent dimple showing itself cautiously in her left cheek, as she responds promptly to the call upon her memory.

"He had to go to the College of Music unusually late," rejoins Susan, snatching the words out of her friend's mouth in triumphant patter ; "but, nevertheless, took his A.R.C.M. in theory, the stiffest exam. the Royal College affords, with ninety-nine marks out of a maximum of a hundred !"

Lavinia breaks in hurriedly. "He is composing an organ fugue in G minor, which has something of the strength and purity of design of Bach !"

They both pause to laugh ; but Lavinia's eyes, falling on the MS., grow suddenly serious again.

"I wonder has she yet offered him marriage?" she says, a remnant of amusement piercing through the habitual sadness of her face.

"It is time that she did," replies Mrs. Darcy, in the same key; adding, after a moment's reflection, and in a lower tone, "It is quite fifteen months since she last proposed to any one."

Lavinia lays down her slips upon the blotting-pad, and sits looking straight in front of her, while with an awful clearness rise before her mind's eye the events so inextricably entangled with Miss Prince's declaration to Binning.

"Why did you say that?" she asks, after a pause of quickened breathing, to which her friend listens with a trepidation which does not hinder a very valiant resolution to persevere.

"Because you never allow me to mention him; because, as I may not speak of him naturally and simply, I must drag him in by the head and shoulders."

No answer.

"Isn't it a puerility to banish him from your speech—to go half a mile out of your way to avoid speaking his poor name—when we both know that he is never for one moment out of your thoughts? No; don't interrupt me! I will have my say out this time! Never for one moment out of your thoughts—not even when you are laying eucharis lilies on Sir George's grave, or editing Rupert's poems."

Lavinia's only answer is to take her hands off the manuscript before her, as if the indictment made

against her rendered her unworthy to touch it ; and her long arms drop to her side.

“Can you deny it?” asks Mrs. Darcy, her *spirituelle* pale face flushing with excitement, thinking that she may as well be killed for a sheep as a lamb, and kneeling down beside her friend to get compelling possession of one of her hands. “I insist upon your answering me !”

For a moment or two of misgiving it seems to the rector’s wife as if her audacity of asking were to break against the same obstinacy of morbid silence as has rebuffed all her previous efforts to speak a forbidden name ; but, after a while, Lavinia answers, a great sigh seeming to tear the words out of her breast—

“I do not deny it ; though why you should have the brutality to force me to own it to-day, particularly, I do not know !”

“Because he is in England !” replies Susan, speaking very softly, with a kindly dew of moisture, making tender her usually keen eyes ; “because, this morning, I had a letter from him, with a London postmark !”

The slips of Rupert’s poems blow off the bureau, and on to the floor, wafted to earth by the irony of a warm gust from the honied garden-beds outside ; but Lavinia is not aware of it. The one hand that she has at liberty flies up to her forehead, as though she were blinded by a sudden light.

“You *must* have seen in the papers that the *Isis*, with his regiment on board, had reached Southampton ; but, perhaps”—with a slight return of satire

lightening the gravity of her eager tones—"perhaps—to be consistent—you do not allow yourself to glance at the war news."

"I did not at first," answers the girl, still looking straight before her, with eyes that yet feel dazzled; "I thought it ought to be part of my punishment; but," faltering, "I had not resolution enough to keep to it. And, even if I had, it would have been no use. The children——"

"Yes," returns the mother, with a rather quivering pride in her voice; "it would be difficult to be long in the company of my progeny without hearing the name of *Binning*"—pronouncing it with a ringing clearness. "*They*, at least, are faithful to the one hero whom they can call friend!"

At the thus audaciously syllabled name, whose utterance has been tacitly prohibited between them for over a year, Lavinia gives a low cry. But in the over-set face that she suddenly turns upon her friend there is no anger, only an immense mazed joy, fighting its way out of the Bastille of the long remorseful sorrow that has prisoned and gagged it; and her fair head falls forward on the shoulder of Binning's advocate. Through the thin fabric of her gown Mrs. Darcy feels the glow of the hidden face, and it spurs her to fresh effort.

"Are you not rather tired of being *dead*?" she whispers. "It is all very well for a time, but it must pall! Come back to life! Put off these hateful weeds, put on a white gown, and come back to life *to-day*! Believe me"—with an accent of exulting

persuasiveness—"you could not choose a better moment!"

* * * * *

The party to the choir boys of St. Gengulpha's is being put through with the thoroughness which, since Mrs. Darcy's advent, fifteen years ago, has characterized all the Rectory functions; and, indeed, is drawing towards its close. For four sunshiny hours, twenty happy boys in flannels, with sharp towny faces, have been expatiating about the grounds, and have drunk to the full of the varied entertainments offered them—entertainments shared by half the neighbourhood, annually compelled by Mrs. Darcy to come in to her aid. The Vicar of St. Gengulpha's and his curates—lean men with intellectual faces, supported by the gamest of their pale choir boys, have stretched muscles that yet remember the playing-fields and the Isis, in the best tug-of-war in the Champion records, against the rector and his inferior songsters. The smartest young ladies of the neighbourhood have not disdained, though hampered by long-tailed swishy gowns, to join in a game of rounders with the visitors, nor do the inelegance of their futile efforts to get their draperies out of the way, nor the potency of the sun's beams at all reduce the good will and perseverance with which they arduously scamper. The "donkey" has repeatedly conquered and been conquered. The donkey is an apocryphal animal, with a wooden head; and, for body, a revolving barrel, mounted on whose elusive convexity the rider has to snatch a threepenny bit from its distant nose. Many are

the ignominious falls given by him, many the glorious victories won over his treacherously turning barrel-stomach. For the lesser boys the threepence is placed further up the nose, within easier reach of the little anxiously grabbing hand ; and frequent are the cheaply generous petitions proffered by elder lads in behalf of their small companions.

" Mightn't 'e 'ave it a bit nearer, sir ? 'e's only a little chap ! "

And the rector, in flannels, having laid aside his pompousness with his broadcloth, hot, genial, turning the handle of his wooden steed with right good will, feigning to be inexorable, always accedes. Then, after tea in the tent—tea in whose distribution every one, even to Serena and the poodle, assist ; after Orpheus glees sung in the dining-room, comes the crowning final joy of the toboggan.

" One ! two ! three ! Are you ready ? "

The eager scramble up the hillock ; the emulous turning round the bag which sits at the top on a sort of milestone ; the getting on to your tea-tray ; the difficulty of keeping your feet on it—an indispensable condition of success ; the mad sliding run down to the grass at the foot—once or twice the impetus carrying the boy divorced from his tray, and landing him on the gravel walk, with barked elbows and shins ;—who can wonder that, in comparison with such pleasures, the donkey himself grows pale ?

The party has been in full swing, before a guest, who, if an oath to appear at it had not been exacted from her, would certainly never have found courage to face it, is seen to be in the midst of associates

from whom she has been so long withdrawn. Lavinia is late—a tardiness not to be accounted for by the simplicity of her toilette, since no one knows with what a long delay of backward-looking apology, with what remorseful cryings-out for forgiveness to her “men” for seeming to forget them, she has put off her black gown, and invested herself in the white muslin which feels like a travesty. It is with something of the shamed shyness of one who suddenly finds himself in broad daylight among a party of ordinarily dressed men and women, clad in the extravagance of a fancy garb, that Miss Carew appears among the acquaintances from whom, for over a year, she has held aloof.

What has she to do amid all this movement and colour and gaiety? Because she has been dragged out of her darkness into light, and had her fetters suddenly knocked off, does that make her a fit member of this happy company? They look at her or she fancies so, strangely; some to whom she has been perfectly well known in former days, not even recognizing her. That she is changed in appearance she has long been indifferently aware; colour and flesh melted away in the smelting-pot of her great affliction, branded with the broad arrow of her uneffaceable suffering. But that she should have become unrecognizable! The unexpected smart of that discovery blinds her to the fact of how faint a hold upon another’s identity is possessed by any human being; of how small a change of costume, *locale*, or circumstance, will confuse the doubtful and inaccurate knowledge which we can master

of even the exterior of our fellow-creatures ! Nor does she realize that in the general centring of attention on the objects of the entertainment, the unobtrusive addition of one more to the already considerable number of tall white maidens on the grounds may momentarily pass without notice. It is with relief and gratitude that, as she moves along in humiliated shyness, with that mazed sense of unreality which has been upon her ever since Mrs. Darcy's morning visit, she hears herself interpolated by the familiar voice of Mrs. Prince.

"Lavinia ! Why, I can scarcely believe my eyes !"

"*You* at least know me !" replies the girl, holding out a hand that seems scarcely to belong to herself, in the unfamiliarity of its white glove.

"Know you, my dear ? Why should not I know you when I see you almost every day of my life ? Why, in Heaven's name, shouldn't I know you ?"

"Other people don't !" replies Lavinia, sombrely. "I passed Lady Greenhithe just now, and she looked perfectly blankly at me. And even Féodorovna ; but then *she* was——" Miss Carew apparently alters her intention of finishing her sentence, for she pauses.

"Féodorovna !" repeats Mrs. Prince, an anxious furrow on her brow becoming suddenly more pronounced. "By-the-by, where is she ? She disappeared almost as soon as we arrived. Did you say that you had seen her ?"

"Yes."

“Where?”

“At the back of the tent.”

“Was she—alone?” with a very apparent apprehension as to what the answer will be.

“No—o; Mr. Sharp—the Shipstone organist, I mean—was with her.”

Mrs. Prince heaves a mortified sigh that is yet tempered with philosophy.

“I wish she had stuck to the army!” she says, shrugging her shoulders. “Neither Mr. Prince nor I would have objected to an army man!”

CHAPTER XXVI

"If I depart from thee I cannot live ;
And in thy sight to die, what were it else
But like a pleasant slumber in thy lap ?"

AFTER all, Lavinia is not unrecognizable. Scarcely has she left Mrs. Prince, whose brow is still creased by the thought of an imminent son-in-law, when one and another claim greetings from her, and in half an hour she has shaken hands with three parts of the gathering ; has been presented to the strange clergy—St. Gengulpha's has a new vicar since last year—and been cordially pressed by Christopher to feel the biceps of one of the East End curate's arms, which has shown its merits in the just-ended tug-of-war.

In the eyes of all them to whom she was already known, has been welcome, a little hesitating surprise, and a not unkindly curiosity. They know that she has passed through deep waters since last in her bloom and bonniness they had looked upon her, though they little guess the awful Dead Sea bitterness of taste of the waters that have gone over her. Is she recovered enough to be treated like any one else ? Will it be better to allude to her long absence,

rejoicing in its having ended ; or to take her reappearance for granted ? Some answer the question in one way and some in the other, as tact or insight diversely guides them ; and she responds quietly to all, with a gravely grateful look from under the frills of her white muslin hat, and that overpowering sense that the acquaintances that accost her are no more real than she herself. But she is not unrecognizable ! Through the haze that enwraps her sensations pierces a throb of joyful reassurance, proportioned to the apprehension that had forerun it—an apprehension not formulated to herself, that if she has so changed as to be unknowable by persons, many of whom have been acquainted with her from childhood, she may, in the dim and distant possibility of their ever meeting again, be passed unrecognized by one whose whole knowledge of her had only covered six weeks.

She has come back from the grave ! Is it any wonder that at first she walks in a maze—as one suddenly awakened from a century of sleep, doubtfully re-entering the kingdom of life ? Glad voices are in the air around her ; glad movement on the pleasant earth about her ; a misty gladness, dim and vast, somewhere deep, deep down in her own being ; and through it all a bewildering misgiving that this feast of life cannot be spread for *her* ; that she does but dream, and will presently awake to the black gown, and the manuscript on the bureau, and the long treadmill of remorse and expiation.

She is roused from her trembling fantasies by the reality of Mrs. Darcy's slender arm command-

ingly hooked into hers, and whirling her away to plaster a barked shin and stem a bleeding nose. But it is only as long as the need for her cobwebs and cold keys lasts that she can keep a hold upon the solid commonplaces of existence. Even while "God save the Queen" is melodiously ringing across the evening meads, even while the gratefully vociferous boys are making their sweet voices hoarse with prolonged cheering from the vehicles packed for their return, she falls back into the uncertain domain of the dream.

In the bustle of subsidiary adieux that follow those of the choir, in reciprocal congratulations upon success and thanks for help, Lavinia steals away unnoticed. She gives no directions to her feet whither to carry her, but, though otherwise will-less in the matter, they know that she shrinks from at once regaining the mournful emptiness of the house on the hill. Anywhere else—anything but that! It is all one to her!

Only a step to the hop-garden at the foot of Campion Place, only a rough cart-track running between the old red-brick wall of the latter and the green battalions of the hop-poles, now clothed with twining verdure from top to bottom. She strolls, still in a dream, along a green aisle, looking down a vista of apparently unending length, the bines, that have been tied round the poles to prevent their straggling, waving defiant strong tendrils over her head to stretch out and embrace the opposite rank, and make pointed arches of Early English in the green cathedral. Showers of pallid green blooms

hang above her, so light and fairy-like in their airy droop, that it seems blasphemy to connect them as necessary concomitants with that contemptible creature—small beer! Parallel aisle upon aisle of riotous verdure, making one gigantic green fane!

At the end of the lofty silence beneath which she is passing burns an altar fire of evening sunshine; and towards it her feet, still without any conscious direction on her part, slowly carry her. But when the end of the vista is reached, and its verdant glow exchanged for the evening red of the fair pasture outside, the altar fire has moved further away, and is blazing with ruddy promise for to-morrow behind the trees of Rumsey Brake. Will she pursue it even thither? where for fifteen months her steps have never trod, which has been to her a banned place since——? Yet her feet still bear her onwards. In the sloping meadows through which she passes, lambs on that day were butting and bounding; there is neither butt nor bounding in the fleecy adults dully cropping and waddling to-night. There were buttercups—millions of buttercups—that day; to-day there are none! To-day the gate that leads into the Brake is open; on that day it was locked. With a shiver of retrospective passion, she recalls the roughness with which she had rebuffed his offer of help, knowing what a conflagration even so casual a contact must light in them both. After all, it might as well have happened then as later! She is on the very path now that they had paced in their burning pain—that woof of pain whose warp was stinging pleasure.

On that day the moor-hens were leading little dainty broods out of the sedge ; to-day there is no life at all on the sunset-painted mirror of the pool. Only that hot blaze that has turned it into the semblance of a cup full of the rosy elixir of life ! Here is where they paused to listen to the nightingale. Intolerable nightingale ! forcing them to hear things forbidden—things that drove them away in terror of him and of each other ; drove them away in the vain hope of averting what must happen, what *had* to happen !

Had to happen ! Yes, and *did* happen ! A sort of exaltation in what she has hitherto always shuddered from as the memory of a crime, takes possession of her. It *was* a sin ! Under the circumstances it was a sin and a treachery ! But she has paid for it. No one can say that she has not paid for it ! and oh, if it could only happen again ! The memory of her fault and her suffering alike grow faint ; while with her whole tingling body and craving soul she feels again the grip of his arms, the thundering beat of his heart against her breast, the scorching insistence of his lips. She will go to the very spot where it happened ; will tryst him there in the aching realism of a memory that seems for once to have been given the never-given privilege of saying to the dead past, bound hand and foot in grave-clothes, " Stand forth ! "

Slowly she paces—her knees trembling a little in the vividness of that deliberate reconstruction—to the very place of their parting. A bend in the grass over-flung path hides it from her till she is

close upon it. The intervening curve is rounded, and her goal is reached. Rooted to the earth she stands; for hasn't the force of her compelling passion evoked his spirit to meet hers? Yet had ever spirit such shoulders? such a sea-tanned face? such a blaze in such eagle eyes? It is no spirit; it is in very truth, in gallant bodily presence, her own dear upstanding fighting man, in the glory and vigour of his manhood, such as till now she has never seen him.

"I can neither live nor die without you, and I have come to tell you so!"

And the grip of his arms is no dream!

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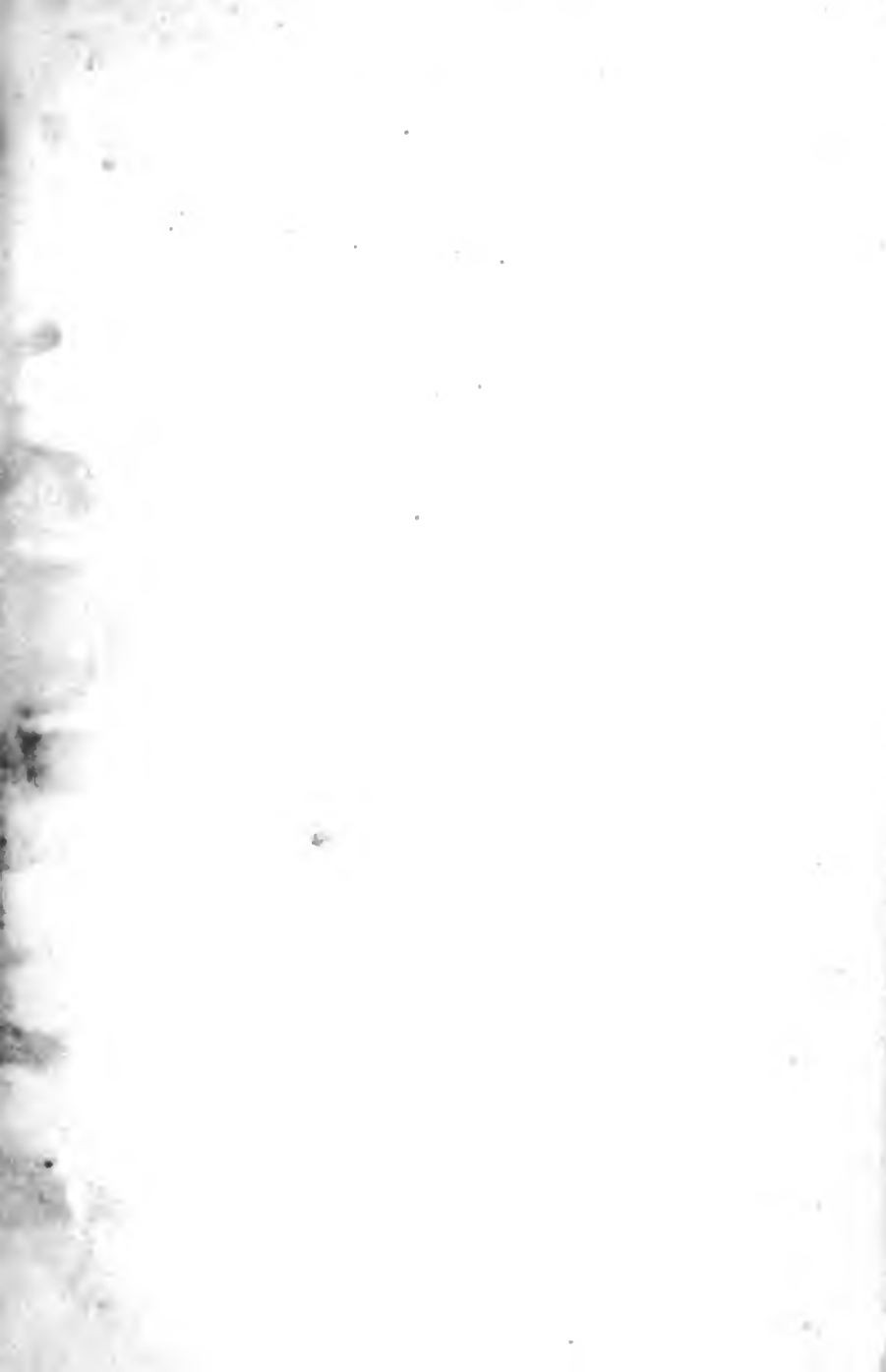
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